

# Evangelism and social action

The case for each

Do we have to  
choose?

**Includes  
discussion  
guide**

# Evangelism and social action

Some Christians want to bring 'social action' right to the centre of Christian activity, so much so that anyone who suggests that evangelism may be a higher or more central priority risks being labelled heartless.

Others see any push for Christian social involvement as a worrying attempt to water down the priority of evangelism.

The Bible makes a strong case for both: we ought to be involved in our communities, and offer physical and material help to those around us who are in need, but there is also the centrality of preaching the gospel. How do these two strands of the Bible's teaching relate together?

The two articles in this MiniZine will help you to examine God's priorities as you think through this important question.

## What is a MiniZine?

It's not a booklet, or a leaflet, or a tract. It's not a full-sized magazine either. It's somewhere in the middle: a short collection of articles, in an economical, easy-to-read format, with a discussion guide included.

The aim is simple: to provide high-quality, Bible-based input to help Christians encourage each other.

MiniZines are ideal for giving away, for starting personal conversations, and for small group discussion.

**Start** the  
conversation





# From the editor

WHICH IS MORE IMPORTANT: PHYSICAL OR SPIRITUAL health? Obviously, spiritual health is more important. If it's a choice between health and wealth on earth, and eternity in heaven, I know which one I'd choose. Easy. Jesus did not instruct us to "Go therefore and feed the poor", but to "make disciples of all nations ... teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (Matt 28:19-20). That is our great commission.

Then again, it's pretty hard to ignore James' fairly blunt and very practical question: "If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace, be warmed and filled', without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that?" (Jas 2:15-16). As Christians, we can make valuable contributions to the societies in which we live—not just materially, but also politically and morally.

So what place do evangelism and social action have in the Christian life? Does feeding the poor earn us the right to preach the gospel because it proves that we care? Or is social involvement a distraction from the real job of preaching God's word?

As former Research and Policy Director for Tearfund UK, and now full-time church planter with The Crowded House, Tim Chester has had to think carefully about these issues. His articles in this MiniZine are really two parts of one argument. The first looks at the Bible's teaching on both Christian social action and evangelism. The second, written with Tony Payne, looks at how these two strands of the Bible's teaching relate together.

As with all our MiniZines, the aim is to encourage thought and discussion. Our hope and prayer is that this material will challenge Christians of all persuasions to re-examine their view on this important issue, and come to a coherent, biblical position. **EMMA THORNETT**

The articles in this MiniZine were first published in *The Briefing*, Matthias Media's monthly magazine. For more info, articles and subscription details go to [www.thebriefing.com.au](http://www.thebriefing.com.au).



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# Social involvement and evangelism

## Part 1: Two strong cases

AUTHOR  TIM CHESTER



Let me introduce **Albert**. Albert calls himself a post-evangelical. He says there are many good things about the evangelical church in which he grew up, but he himself has grown out of evangelicalism's narrowness. Like his postmodern friends, he is wary of truth claims and instead he wants to emphasize symbols and images.

This makes him much more comfortable with social involvement than with evangelism. Evangelism makes him uneasy because, as he puts it, "we are all on a faith journey", and he thinks that evangelism among the poor is simply manipulative. His catchphrase is "Don't force your truth on others". Instead, we should walk with the poor, care for them and help them on their faith journey while expecting them to enrich our own faith journeys.

Then there is **Brian**. Brian happily calls himself a conservative evangelical. As far as

he is concerned the main task of the church is preaching the gospel. He is regularly involved in open-air preaching and door-to-door visitation. He sees any form of social involvement as a return to the social gospel—a movement at the beginning of the 20th century that believed the kingdom of God could come in history through Christian social action. He complains about trendy new Christian organizations doing social work and diverting money from traditional missionary agencies. As far as he is concerned, and he is not slow to tell you this, "social action is heresy". In fact, however, he has taken action on abortion and Sunday trading because he sees these as undermining the Christian foundations of the nation.

Meet **Catherine**. Catherine is unashamedly an evangelical. She believes strongly in the authority of the Bible and is enthusiastic about evangelism—she runs the seekers' course in her church. But when people say that the church should focus on preaching, her hackles

rise. She points out that the Bible has a lot to say about the poor and the need to care for both physical and spiritual needs. She thinks it is unhelpful to say that one thing is more important than another. “Physical and spiritual together” is her motto. She has spent many hours arguing it out with people like Brian in her church. Every time the church discusses reaching its community or spending its missionary funds, the argument starts up again.

Finally, let me introduce **Douglas**.

Douglas is the minister of an evangelical church that is popular with students from the nearby university. He is committed to an expository ministry because he believes the word is central to Christian mission and Christian experience. Douglas sees students affected by the relativism of their peers and the postmodernism of their lecturers. He sees them lacking the confidence to share the gospel with their friends and opting for social involvement as a socially acceptable alternative. He fears that people like Albert are leading evangelicals back into liberalism. He acknowledges the validity of Christian social involvement and he is happy for his church to have Tearfund Sunday each year. But he wants to reassert the centrality of the word and the priority of word-centred ministry.

All of these examples are based on real people. But, as they say, their names have been changed to protect their identities. Their positions characterize—and perhaps caricature—the ongoing debate about social involvement and its place in Christian life and mission. Is social involvement something we should prioritize as well as evangelism? Is it another way of doing evangelism? Or is it perhaps a distraction from the real job of proclaiming the gospel? This essay explores these issues.

I have introduced the four characters above not only to present the issues, but also to make an important preliminary observation. Catherine has always discussed these issues with people like Brian. She has spent her life trying to persuade the Brians of this world that social involvement is legitimate. Douglas on the other hand has people like Albert in mind when he thinks about these issues. He

has real concerns about the effect that Albert’s ideas are having on young Christians. When Catherine and Douglas come together they appear to be poles apart. When they talk to each other, Catherine thinks she is still arguing with Brian and Douglas thinks he is arguing with Albert. The debate gets heated and there appears to be no agreement.

But I want to suggest that Catherine and Douglas may be much closer to each other than they realize.

What I wish to do in this essay is look briefly at the strength of Catherine’s position, and of Douglas’s—that is, there is a strong biblical case for evangelical social involvement, and an equally strong case for maintaining the centrality of gospel proclamation in our activities. In part 2 (written with Tony Payne) I will consider the relationship between social involvement and evangelism, and how the positions of Catherine and Douglas might be brought together.

As I do so, I will not draw strong distinctions between terms like social concern, social involvement, sociopolitical action, community development and so on.

Certainly there are different forms of social involvement, ranging from simply providing for a person’s immediate needs to challenging the economic and political structures of

a society. These distinctions are significant, but I do not want to load too much weight on to particular words. I will use the various terms in a fairly fluid and interchangeable way, making distinctions explicit only when they are significant. *By ‘social involvement’ I mean both a concern for those within the Christian community, and the Christian community caring for the needs of its neighbours in the wider society and offering a place of belonging. It can also include changing the policies, structures and culture of society through social reform. But social reform will always be limited prior to the return of Christ. Above all, the church witnesses to the coming reign of God.*

**There is a strong biblical case for evangelical social involvement, and an equally strong case for maintaining the centrality of gospel proclamation in our activities.**