



# URBAN CURRENT

## The Gospel of Good Works

I don't do things like that," the pastor on the other end of the line said in a quiet but determined tone. "I preach the gospel."

The Chicago schools were bankrupt. By state law unless the legislature appropriated some funds from somewhere, schools would not be opening in four weeks. I was inviting pastors to join our group to voice concern to the mayor, pressuring him to pull strings, move mountains, do what big city mayors do, so our kids could start school on schedule. I had called this pastor cited above and was met with his flat-footed response.

The phrase caught my eye in Titus. Good works are to be an outward example (2:7), marked by holy enthusiasm (2:15), the result of purposeful engagement (3:8), and to be the result of Christian education (3:14). The language here is "Keep on learning how ..."

Of course, my mind went to Matthew 5, "Let your light so shine ... that they may see your good works ..." References began to jump out at me. In 1 Timothy 6:18, the apostle charges the wealthy to be rich in good works. Paul challenges believers in Galatia to do good unto all, especially those who are of the household of faith (6:10). Clearly, he speaks here of good works not confined to believers.

There is Paul's famous line to the Ephesians, "We are ... created in Christ Jesus unto good works which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them." Hmmm. One of the primary purposes of salvation is good works. Second Timothy 3:15-16 essentially says it's the Word which furnishes us for every good work. The whole point of scripture is to equip us for good works. Now take these two texts together. Under the nexus of good works prepared for us, and believers prepared for every good work.

Rightfully, some of the biggest doers of

good works are believers. The entire rescue mission movement is Christian run, Christian funded. Think of all the schools and hospitals overseas that Christians have founded, funded, and run. Look at all of the informal good works done through bus ministries. What of the millions of people impacted through counseling, children, and youth programs? We've been serving soup, providing shelter, teaching reading, writing, and arithmetic, giving shots, providing reading glasses, and on and on. Whole tribes in the South Pacific stopped eating each other because of Christians. William Carey transformed societal and cultural structures in India on his way to evangelize the nation.

I don't know where these anti-social action people are coming from. Oh, I get that they're concerned over liberals who are all soup and no salvation. But to spiritually react to an effort to get children back in school and say "I just preach the gospel" is one of the biggest misreads of New Testament Christianity I can fathom. It's a misunderstanding of the gospel.

I thought one of the best things I could be giving myself to as a pastor and community leader was to try to get those schools open. My effort didn't displace the gospel. It flowed from the gospel. And oh yeah, it gave me an opportunity to pray a gospel-based prayer in a packed conference room with community leaders of all stripes from all over the city. Mayor Daley shooed the press out and was about to start the meeting. He looked down the table and said, "Pastor Lyons, would you open us in prayer?"

As I studied good works in the New Testament, I was shocked by the lack of treatment of several commentators I referenced. How could they blow right by this? This is such a big deal in my context. Service has been a huge door-opener in this deep blue, spiritually hostile

environment. Good works have been absolutely necessary in this jungle of human need.

Here's my theory. Our social and cultural status shapes our theology. Our American, white, middle-class Christianity has been provincialized by its Americanness, blinded by its whiteness, weighed down by its bulging middle, and restricted by its class. Our cultural Christianity, and I'm talking fundamentalists and evangelicals here, has been less shaped by the New Testament than it has been by its culture.

The schools did not open on time. The Armitage Baptist alternative school did open, staffed by CPS personnel from our own congregation who weren't going to work anyway. The headline in *Chicago Sun Times* read "Baptist Church gets Kids Back to Books. The city lists 600 alternative school sites. But few are as comprehensive as Armitage Baptist Church with math, reading, free lunches and athletics." What they didn't add was "... and a big dose of Jesus."

*P.S. (with God, there is always more)*

How was I to know that the following spring, political radicals, anarchists, and gay activists would canvass our neighborhood to solicit support for a pro-choice, anti-Armitage demonstration in front of our building. Later, we were told that again and again after hearing the activists' spiel, our neighbors would say, "Well, I don't know anything about that, but I know they're good people. They opened a school when public schools were closed."

by Charles Lyons, Pastor  
Armitage Baptist Church,  
Chicago, Illinois  
[charles.lyons@armitagechurch.org](mailto:charles.lyons@armitagechurch.org)

