

WHY WE DO WHAT WE DO – A BIBLICAL VIEW

ONE HUNDRED AND FIFTY YEARS OF HELPING CHILDREN

A journey of generosity and giving through the generations



Creation and the Character of God

In the act of creation God gave us the world and dominion over its resources. Kent A Van Til has stated that “Humans are uniquely capable of deriving their sustenance from this world, since, as those created in the image and likeness of God, we have the creativity and resourcefulness to develop creation’s potential.” God gave a perfect world for humans to enrich and explore but humans in rejecting God’s reign have chosen to live under their own authority thereby creating much conflict, suffering, injustice, and poverty as a result.

Whilst suffering, injustice and poverty came into the world because humans did not obey God’s instructions, God chose not to abandon His creation. Indeed He has upheld the cause of those who suffer and continues to sustain the marginalized and vulnerable. This is God’s character, to come to the aid of the oppressed; consequently our social involvement is rooted in the character of God. Tim Chester has stated that “The God who ‘upholds the case of the oppressed and gives food to the hungry’ expects us to walk in His ways. He expects His people to share His concern for justice..... God will not hear His people when they ignore the claims of the poor (Is.1:10- 17). The appropriate response to the God who upholds the poor is for us likewise to uphold the cause of the poor. This is the truly religious activity of those who follow the God of the Bible.” The Society’s foundations reflect this aspect of God’s character. One of its founders, Dr. Wilberforce Arnold, made a plea in 1865 to help the orphan children of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland. He stated, “And then what are the motives urging us to engage in this work? They are the highest possible! Herein consists a part of that ‘pure and undefiled religion’ which the Bible urges us to revere and teaches us to practice. Its very dignity attracts us. It is a God-like work, and we are emphatically fellow-workers with Him when we protect the fatherless, for the ‘Lord is the orphan’s shield.’”

“When death lays the bread-winner low, with the sorrows of widowhood and orphanage come those of poverty, and the hallowed peace and love of home must be exchanged for the uncongenial companionship of the workhouse.”

Dr William Johnston

The language, whilst archaic, still resonates with the themes of God’s creation and our responsibility to serve Him by siding with the plight of those in need. In its continued identification with those on the margins, the Society finds itself in tune with the nature of God and His empathy with those pushed to the edges of our society.

Concern for Casualties and “Crucial Functionings”

If God wants us to identify with those on the margins of society and focus our attention and concern on them we need to answer the question - who are these people on the margins? Kent A Van Til observes “In Scripture ‘the widow, the orphan, and the alien’ was the traditional listing for the category that indicated the needy.....when the Bible was constantly calling on Israelites to stand up for the widow, the orphan, and the alien, it was calling on those with standing and power to support those who were powerless.” Whilst widows, orphans and aliens can still require help in the twenty-first century, can we have a contemporary definition of those in need which embodies the spirit of the biblical listing? Van Til cites a definition given by Amartya Sen, a Nobel Laureate in economics, as a useful tool in examining this question.

Van Til states that “For Sen, economic systems are to be judged successful when they provide human agents with the capability they need to achieve crucial functionings. These ‘functionings’ may include basic physical things such as being nourished and sheltered, breathing clean air, and so forth. They may also include more abstract notions, such as possessing self-respect and dignity, participating in the life of community, and being able to appear in public without shame.Sen acknowledges that the basic needs of people in the developed world may be vastly different from those of the ‘two-thirds’ world.” Equality therefore will not make everyone alike but rather it is the means for everyone to fulfil their full potential within their own cultural context. Van Til concludes that “In biblical times, orphans, widows, and aliens were incapable of functioning within Israelite society. Providing people with the means to function in their society today thus seems analogous to the biblical demand to care for the widows, orphans and aliens of scripture.”

Can the Society be easily identified with this kind of thinking?

Certainly it has continued to carry out the biblical injunction to assist the widows and orphans, and, in helping immigrant families now finding their way into Presbyterian congregations, it also helps what the Bible terms “the alien”. However, the Society’s role today is also akin to helping families and their children achieve the “crucial functionings” alluded to by Amartya Sen. This role has been a product of an acknowledgement of the changing nature of the church’s role within an industrialised and complex western society. Holmes notes that “Traditionally Presbyterianism grappled with social problems at local or congregational level and, in the early nineteenth century, Thomas Chalmers contended that the local parish or congregation still provided the best kind of caring fellowship and personal service needed to meet the growing problems of urban industrial society. Others argued that these problems were too big and complex for any kind of solution at parish or congregational level, and we find that churches were being driven to develop new agencies in which the resources of the church as a whole could be used to meet mounting social problems.

“This then is the day when the Church should come forth in its beauty. Heaven has smiled. The earth hath yielded her increase. Our Lord hath blessed us. What shall we render unto Him for all His goodness, ought to be the language of our hearts!”

Dr Wilberforce Arnold, 1865

The Kinghan Mission to the Deaf and Dumb (1857) and the Presbyterian Orphan Society (1866) were early examples of Irish Presbyterian agencies of this kind.” The Society was therefore part of a move by the church to address social issues on a church wide basis.

Our Biblical Focus Today

Today the Society, whilst clearly not using the language of ‘crucial functionings’, nevertheless addresses this area in its Vision statement where it states “The Society would like to see every Presbyterian child in Ireland develop materially, physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually, both within their church and community, so that they would grow to full maturity as individuals and members of society. We would like to strengthen and support the family by enhancing financial independence and providing, where possible, resources to enable children to fulfil their full potential.” This thinking is reinforced in its Mission statement which alludes to family support and the enhancement of children’s life chances. The concept of ‘crucial functionings’ is useful in relation to the Society’s way of caring today, particularly with such a wide variety of family circumstances that do not always fit neat categorisation.

The Society’s role today, clearly aligned with fulfilling the potential of every child it helps, sits easily with traditional groupings of those helped in Scripture and a more modernised and nuanced list which embodies the spirit of the biblical model.



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