

The Identity of the Poor in Luke 4:18, Jesus' Ministry, and the Mission of the Church

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I. INTRODUCTION

What is the mission of the church in the twenty-first century? The search for an answer to this question has resulted in robust debate among theologians, church practitioners, and missiologists. A simple example can be seen in an interaction between Kevin DeYoung, Greg Gilbert, and Ed Stetzer. DeYoung and Gilbert initially argued in a 2011 volume on the church that its mission was "...to go into the world and make disciples by declaring the Gospel of Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit and gathering these disciples into churches that they might worship the Lord and obey His commands now and in eternity to the glory of God the Father."¹ Such a definition narrows the church's mission to traditional concepts like evangelism, personal discipleship, and ecclesiastical community.²

However, as their book garnered attention, Stetzer critiqued their proposal. After initially commending them for joining the conversation on this matter, he challenged their thesis for its shortsightedness because it based the church's mission almost exclusively upon well-known Great Commission passages like Matthew 28:18–20.³ Stetzer countered that the church's task in disciple-making is not restricted to evangelistic outreach

¹Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert, *What Is the Mission of the Church? Making Sense of Social Justice, Shalom, and the Great Commission* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 62.

²Ibid. Also, this approach stands in contrast to numerous other proposals. For instance, see perspectives advocated by various practitioners in Craig Ott, ed. *The Mission of the Church: Five Views in Conversation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2016).

³See Ed Stetzer, "Book Review of DeYoung and Gilbert's *What Is the Mission of the Church*," *Themelos* 36, no. 3 (November 2011), 587.

or teaching basic spiritual disciplines. It also requires the church to teach “everything Jesus commanded,” which includes love and good deeds that impact the world at large.⁴ Thus, one can begin to see a divergence. Some confine the church’s mission to evangelism, spiritual disciplines, and ecclesiology-oriented praxis. Others, who do not necessarily disagree with these objectives, contend that the church should additionally show believers how to apply Jesus’ teachings in ways that have a more direct impact on society as a whole. Consequently, one can say that there is notable gridlock on whether the church should only focus on reaching the peoples of the world evangelistically or also strive to reform social injustices throughout the world.⁵

Another way this discussion can be observed pertains to how the messianic mission, as described by Jesus in Luke 4:16–21, relates to the mission of the church. Twenty-first-century South African missiologist David Bosch has been one among several who have noted a growing interest concerning this passage. He has observed that some believe Luke 4:16–21 supersedes traditional attempts to base the church’s mission primarily upon Matthew 28:18–20. Previously over the past two centuries, the Matthean Great Commission text provided a missional foundation for Western Protestantism. Yet some propose that the Lukan passage challenges this approach, serving as “the key text not only for understanding Christ’s own mission but also that of the church.”⁶ Now there is a new growing stream of thought that conflates the messianic mission of Jesus with that of the church. In turn, this perspective has led to a broader definition of the church’s mission that goes beyond the sole bounds of evangelism and related ministry outreach.⁷

At this point, we recognize that the implications of such a development are theologically and practically enormous. So much so that evangelicals, pastors, missionaries, and other church leaders continue to address its complexities, especially as the church moves forward in the early twenty-first century. Nonetheless, our concern amidst the spectrum of concerns that this discussion raises is the role of Luke 4:18 in our understanding of the nature of the church’s mission. To address this matter, we will provide an initial exegetical analysis of this passage with special emphasis given to the meaning of “the poor” mentioned in the text. Then we will survey how an assortment of Christian thinkers have interpreted the meaning of “the poor” in Luke 4:18 and related it to their

⁴Ibid, 587–88.

⁵On this point, Michael Goheen points out that Leslie Newbigin attempted to resolve this tension by “...making a distinction between missionary *intention* and the missionary *dimension* of the church’s activities...” See Michael Goheen, *The Church and Its Vocation: Leslie Newbigin’s Missionary Ecclesiology* (Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, 2018), 76–77.

⁶David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 84.

⁷For more discussion on this matter, see Christopher Wright’s treatment in *The Mission of God’s People: A Biblical Theology for the Church’s Mission*, (Langham Partnership International, 2010; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 273–78.

overall view of salvation. This will set the stage for our final argument that Jesus' depiction of his mission in Luke 4:18 is compatible with a traditional or classical view of the church's mission.

II. EXAMINING LUKE 4:16–30

The section of Luke 4:16–21 recounts Jesus' visit to Nazareth and his claims regarding the fulfillment of prophetic hopes described in Isaiah 61:1–2 and 58:6. While the other synoptic gospels begin with the imprisonment of John the Baptist at this point (cf., Mark 1:14; Matt 4:12), Luke records an introductory summary in Luke 4:14–15 describing Jesus' growing popularity among many in Israel as a prelude to the reaction he was going to receive in Nazareth.⁸ The reason for this is that Luke concentrates on the ministry of Jesus as a whole before he set his face toward Jerusalem.⁹

We see in Luke 4:16–17 that Jesus arrives in Nazareth and according to his Jewish custom, he visited the local synagogue on the Sabbath. Jesus, at one point during the gathering, is invited to read from the Hebrew Scriptures.¹⁰ Luke records that he stood up to indicate that he would read and instruct the people. He chose the reading from the Prophets and found the place in Isaiah, which would indicate that he chose this particular passage to expound.¹¹ Jesus commences in Luke 4:18–19 by referencing Isaiah 61:1–2 and 58:6. The likelihood of alluding to these two passages is that they mutually share a Jubilee motif. The quoted section of Isaiah 58 contains a prophetic rebuke for Israel's failure to care for the needy. Then Isaiah 61 proclaims a time to come that is similar to the one envisioned by the nation in Isaiah 58. So, when Jesus applies these passages to himself, he is declaring that God's anointed servant, the Messiah, has arrived to initiate the deliverance that Isaiah anticipated and Israel had not yet seen.¹²

⁸Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke 1–10*, Anchor Bible Series (New York: Doubleday, 1981), 523.

⁹I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 175.

¹⁰Although scholars debate the exact order and nature of the synagogue service in the first century, there is some consensus that they usually consisted of a recitation of the *Shema*, prayers, a reading from the Law, Prophets, instruction, and benediction. Luke gives no details of the arrangement of the synagogue service. See *Ibid.*, 182.

¹¹This account of the synagogue in Nazareth marks the first concrete example of Jesus' teaching in Galilee that Luke mentions. See Fitzmyer, *Gospel According to Luke 1–10*, 526.

¹²Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 1:1–9:50*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 406. There are also connections to Isaiah's concept of the Lord's Servant as well when examining Isaiah 61:1–2, thereby showing that no mere prophet could accomplish such feats on his own. Edward J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 40–66*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 458–59. Fitzmeyer, however, argues that there are no "Servant" overtones in this passage. See Fitzmyer, *Gospel According to Luke 1–10*, 529.

Also, it should be noted that the tying of Luke 4:19 to the Jubilee theme is not referring to a literal fulfillment of the *legal* Old Testament ramifications of Jubilee. Rather, it is a reference to the dawning of a new age. Jubilee-like benefits have now arrived in Jesus' ministry such as forgiveness and reconciliation. A year, or time of favor, is now emerging in history.¹³ What is ironic, though, is that Isaiah 61:2 features both an "acceptable year" as well as a "the day of vengeance." The time of Jubilee anticipates both divine grace and justice.¹⁴ Yet Luke records Jesus as quoting only the first part of Isaiah 61:2. Thus, Jesus' choice to omit a time of retribution meant it had not arrived at this point (Luke 9:51–56; 17:22–37; 21:5–37).¹⁵

The drama subsequently builds in Luke 4:20–22 after Jesus reads these eschatological passages because the people now await his comments. He closed the scroll, returned it to the attendant, and sat down. Jesus eventually declares that the time of this Scripture's fulfillment was now.¹⁶ His coming marked the dawning of a new era because he had come to preach the Good News of Isaiah 61. Yet there was the added responsibility of the hearers to decide what they would do with the message that he was sharing. The long-awaited time finally arrived through Jesus and the looming question was whether this crowd would choose to embrace it.¹⁷ Initially, they marveled at his words, which makes the reader think Jesus' declarations may be on the cusp of a good outcome. However, they immediately remember his heritage. Their familiarity with his background leads them to question his messiahship. Ultimately it contributes to a hostile reaction as the event continues to unfold.¹⁸ What they assume about his Nazarene upbringing does not match his lofty theological claims and so their doubts end in rejection.¹⁹

Luke then records Jesus' response upon acknowledging what the audience asked him (Luke 4:23–27). Jesus knew their thoughts and quoted a popular proverb. This was unexpected. The crowd wanted to see Jesus perform something spectacular before they would believe. They desired the same treatment as Capernaum because his work there had not gone unnoticed.²⁰ Instead, Jesus rebuked the crowd for requesting signs. Why would he perform a sign if the crowd would not receive an open

¹³Isaiah 49:8 uses it in preparation for the coming of the Servant. See J. Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1993), 500.

¹⁴John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 40–66*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 565.

¹⁵Bock, *Luke 1:1–9:50*, 410–11.

¹⁶For emphasis, the use of the perfect tense "*plelerotai*" indicates an existing state of fulfillment.

¹⁷Bock, *Luke 1:1–9:50*, 412–13.

¹⁸Marshall, *Gospel of Luke*, 185.

¹⁹Bock, *Luke 1:1–9:50*, 413–14.

²⁰The request to do signs lingered with Jesus throughout his ministry. Cf., Luke 4:3; 11:16; 22:64; 23:8, 35–37 as referenced in Bock, *Luke 1:1–9:50*, 416.

declaration that the “acceptable year of the Lord” had come?²¹ Jesus subsequently refers back to a low time in Israel’s history during the ministries of Elijah and Elisha. The point of the story in historical comparison was simply this. The Jewish contemporaries in Jesus’ hometown were going to miss out on God’s blessing just like most of the ancient Israelites did in Elijah/Elisha’s day. Yet others who are far away from Israel like the Gentile widow of Zarephath were now going to receive it.²² Jesus goes further by reinforcing the same message with another Old Testament illustration. No leper in Israel received God’s cleansing. Only a Gentile leper named Naaman did. This account makes Jesus’ point clear once again, namely that being too close to a potential blessing can cause some to miss it because of unbelief whereas those who are farthest away may receive it because of their faith.²³

Moreover, the problem with Jesus’ illustrations was not that they were misunderstood. No. Just the opposite occurred. Their very understanding of Jesus’ point is what led to their negative response. These Old Testament illustrations provoked the people to anger because Jesus was going to reach outsiders instead of performing miracles in Nazareth, his own hometown. Luke records that the crowd rose up and took hold of him to remove him from the synagogue so they could kill him (Luke 4:28–30). Not only did they reject his claim to messiahship. They believed he was a false prophet worthy of death. This is why they tried to throw him off the cliff, only to no avail.²⁴

III. THE “POOR” IN LUKE 4:18 AND ISAIAH 61:1

Before any possible connections can be addressed regarding the relationship between Jesus’ messianic claims in Nazareth and the mission of the church, attention needs to be given to what “the poor” means in Isaiah’s original prophecy. Does it primarily refer to the socially and economically destitute who are exploited by society at large? Is Jesus’ mission primarily concerned with delivering these people from grinding poverty? If so, how does that objective connect with the mission of the church? These questions ring loudly today when discussing the relationship between evangelism and social engagement. So, it is imperative to address this matter directly before moving forward.

1. The “Poor” in Isaiah 61:1

²¹Sadly, this local rejection by the crowd was just a precursor to a much larger rejection in the near future.

²²Bock, *Luke 1:1–9:50*, 416–18.

²³*Ibid.*, 418–19.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 419–20.

The word “poor” (πτωχός) used in Luke 4:18 is a critical component of Isaiah 61:1, especially since it connects with related depictions of the brokenhearted, the captives, the prisoners, and those who grieve. The original Hebrew term (עָנִי or עָנָו) can mean “bent over or humble” while the adjective עָנָו can be translated as “humble,” “needy,” “afflicted,” and “poor.”²⁵ It is important to add that the word עָנִי can refer to more than just financial or material conditions.²⁶ This is why Old Testament scholars who specialize in Isaiah interpret the word differently. Some translate it “poor,”²⁷ “sufferers,” “poor-downtrodden, the disadvantaged,”²⁸ “afflicted,”²⁹ and “meek.”³⁰ The word is used in the book of Isaiah as seen in an early comparison that the prophet makes between the עָנָו and God’s people (Isa 3:14–15). In context, he condemns the rich for their inequities to Israel’s עָנָו whom Isaiah considered to be a major part of the covenant society. Shortly after this, Isaiah depicts Zion as being founded for the purpose of being a refuge for the “afflicted” (עָנָו) in Isaiah 14:32. Later he even uses the word עָנָו to describe a great reversal (Isa 26:6), one where the distressed עָנָו will stand and place their feet upon the ruins of their enemies. As one approaches Isaiah 40–55, the people hope for God’s intervention to bring them back from exile and Isaiah promises the afflicted (עָנָו) that they can have hope in the prospect of a return. These people who were afflicted, humiliated, and oppressed (עָנָו) will be recipients of divine compassion (Isa 49:13) and offered a new covenant of peace (Isa 54:11). Furthermore, it is in this context of ministering to these people that the prophetic Servant/Messiah passage in Isaiah 61:1 declares that God’s anointed one will deliver good news to the humble and afflicted (עָנָו).³¹

2. Luke’s Reference to Jesus’ Quotation of Isaiah

Luke’s recounting of Jesus’ quotation from Isaiah 61 includes the original reference to the poor (πτωχός). The Greek word here aligns with the original Hebrew semantic range of עָנִי or עָנָו. In fact, πτωχός is the most common equivalent used in the Septuagint (100x) to translate the Hebrew word עָנִי.³² Luke uses πτωχός ten times—more than the other

²⁵W. J. Dumbrell, “עָנָו,” in *The Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, 5 vol., ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 3:454.

²⁶Oswalt, *Isaiah*, 564.

²⁷Ibid., 561.

²⁸Motyer, *Prophecy of Isaiah*, 500.

²⁹Young, *Isaiah*, 458.

³⁰Allan A. MacRae, *Studies in Isaiah* (Hatfield: Interdisciplinary Biblical Research, 1995), 292.

³¹Dumbrell, “עָנָו,” 4:457–58.

³²Ernst Bammel, “πτωχός,” in *The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 10 vol., ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, trans., Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 6: 888–89.

Synoptic Gospels.³³ Similar to Isaiah, it sometimes describes people who are experiencing economically unfavorable conditions and similar to נָצַר, it can also refer to people of faith who desperately yearn for divine resources.³⁴ Thus, πτωχός can refer to the hope that the humble express toward God despite their circumstances. These overtones are present in the Isaiah quotation because Luke connects these πτωχός with the kingdom of God, a feature that continues throughout his gospel. Such an eschatological nuance emerges, for example, in the use of the word in Luke 6:20. Here Jesus announces a blessing on those who are poor because they will inherit the kingdom of God. These people are not merely part of a socioeconomic group. They are the “pious poor” who express their dependence upon God because they have no other to whom they can turn.³⁵ This is what characterizes Jesus’ words in Matthew 5:3 where he speaks of the “poor in spirit.” The “poor” (πτωχός) in this context refers to a group’s certain religious character, their humble condition before God.³⁶ Conversely, the ideas of being destitute before the Lord and being poor economically are not necessarily antithetical. They can be complementary notions.

This way of referring to the πτωχός can be seen in other parts of Luke such as the stories of Lazarus the beggar (Luke 16:20, 22), Zacchaeus (Luke 19:8), and the poor widow (Luke 21:1–4). In the first account, Luke identifies Lazarus as one of the believing poor (πτωχός), which again harkens back to what is found earlier in Luke (e.g., Luke 4:18, 6:20, and 7:22). His plight is contrasted with the rich man’s. Lazarus is destitute while the rich man lives in the lap of luxury. Yet their experiences are greatly reversed after they die. Lazarus, who was a sick beggar, is welcomed into Abraham’s bosom whereas the unnamed rich man experiences torment. So, in accordance with Jesus’ teaching elsewhere that no one can serve two masters (Luke 16:13), part of the story’s point is that “poor” Lazarus had *nothing* but God (i.e., poor but rich) while the rich man had *everything* but God (i.e., rich but poor). A similar point is echoed later in the conversion of Zacchaeus. This story is

³³Cf., Luke 6:20; 7:22; 14:13, 21; 16:20, 22; 18:22; 19:8; 21:3, as seen in Robert Stein, *Luke*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 156. Also in the LXX, the term corresponds to the Hebrew concept of being “low, wasted and weak in substance or natural strength. See C. Frederick Temples, “A Study of Poverty and Prosperity in the Book of Proverbs” (Masters thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1980), 13.

³⁴s.v. “poor (πτωχός)” in Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, trans., William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, rev., Frederick William Danker, 3rd ed., (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000). In Greek literature, the term πτωχός refers almost exclusively to socioeconomic conditions.

³⁵Bock, *Luke 1:1–9:50*, 573. Also see Gary T. Meadors, “The ‘Poor’ in the Beatitudes of Matthew and Luke,” in *Grace Theological Journal* 6, no. 2 (1985), 305. Also, a similar idea can be seen in the Psalms where David occasionally declares himself to be “poor” and “needy” (e.g., Pss 40:17; 86:1; 109:22). These claims did not to refer his economic state. They alluded to his vulnerable state before the Lord.

³⁶Stein, *Luke*, 200–01.

preceded by the account of the rich young ruler who turned away from Jesus because he was unwilling to surrender his possessions to the poor (Luke 19:18–25). Jesus concluded that barring a miracle, a rich man could not enter the kingdom of heaven (Luke 19:26). Still, miracles can happen on occasion because Zacchaeus is a prime example. He was a rich man who went through the eye of a needle. He was a wealthy man who confessed that he had nothing.³⁷ Then after he turned to Jesus, he gave gifts back to the poor.³⁸ Thus, contrary to the rich young ruler who would yield nothing, Zacchaeus' conversion persuaded him to share his monetary resources with the πτωχός.³⁹ Finally, Luke 21:3 highlights this same point by describing the generosity of a widow. Jesus commends this widow who was πτωχός because even though the amount of her offering to the temple was meager materially speaking, its significance was vast because she gave all she had to the Lord. It revealed her faith because she expressed utter dependence upon God.⁴⁰

3. Jesus Preaching to “the Poor”

In summary, Jesus' reference to “the poor” in Isaiah's prophecy stands in continuity with how Luke depicts them throughout his gospel. They are lacking in monetary resources, thereby being at the bottom of the ancient socioeconomic scale. However, one should not deduce from this that being fiscally poor automatically means one is rich toward God or that those who are financially wealthy cannot know God. The key is that those who are literally poor are sometimes in a better position to rely on God because their plight forces them to live in hope of his provision. Moreover, their hope was sometimes realized in preliminary ways during Jesus' ministry when he healed the sick, raised the dead, or cleansed lepers. But it must be noted that in many other instances, deliverance was deferred because Jesus did not rescue everyone from literal prisons (such as John the Baptist). Believers were not rescued from Roman subjugation, nor did Jesus even quote the latter part of Isaiah's prophecy that God's anointed would usher in the day of vengeance. Consequently, we not only see from Jesus' quotation of Isaiah 61 that redemption entails promises of deliverance from both personal sin and physical distress. We also see that they come to pass progressively, or in a gradual fashion. Some of the blessings related to the good news of the gospel were experienced in Jesus' day while its full culmination would not unfold according to everyone's expectations. Israel, including the people of Nazareth, anticipated a Messianic figure who would restore the nation. Jesus' message, however, emphasized the pressing need for the inward

³⁷See Luke 6:24; 8:14; 12:13–21; 16:10–13, 19–31, as referenced in Stein, *Luke*, 458.

³⁸*Ibid.*, 468.

³⁹Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 671.

⁴⁰Stein, *Luke*, 509; Bock, *Luke 1:11–9:50*, 525–26.

transformation of sinners before the permanent renewal of everything else would commence. Therefore, the complete end of unjust imprisonment, poverty, and blindness was predicated on the forgiveness of sins, redemption, and new spiritual identity.

It is at this point that Jesus' appeal to Isaiah 61 dovetails with the later Matthean commission to make disciples of all the nations. Jesus' mission was to minister to those that society ignored by offering them redemption from their own sins as well as a final restoration from the corrupt age in which they suffered. Even though these objectives were not mutually exclusive, one did hold priority over the other. The present age, with all of its corruption and fallenness, will not transition to the age to come until people become followers of the Messiah first by experiencing an initial change wrought by the Spirit. It is here where the church takes the lead to make followers of Christ who become part of his kingdom and offer an alternative community to the surrounding world. The question that remains is how the church should minister to the physical needs of people and stand against the ongoing injustices of the world while simultaneously being involved in evangelistic outreach. It is here where Christian thinkers over the centuries have experienced some significant differences of opinion.

IV. CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVES LEADING UP TO THE TWENTIETH CENTURY REGARDING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN JESUS' MINISTRY TO THE POOR AND THE CHURCH'S MISSION

The point we have made thus far regarding the relationship between the messianic mission described in Luke 4 and the church's great commission in Matthew 28 is not something new nor has it developed in a historical vacuum. There has been much discussion, engagement, and significant debate over the centuries between Christian thinkers on this matter, especially as it relates to the meaning of "the poor" in the Isaiah quotation. This is why a brief overview of some perspectives on the subject deserves attention.⁴¹ It will show how biblical interpreters have wrestled to find a theological balance between Jesus' promises to bring redemption from sin as well as deliverance from physical maladies and social ills. Likewise, this selective survey will help set the stage for our conclusions on how the mission of the church coincides with Jesus' claim to preach the gospel to the poor.

⁴¹Church history assists readers in understanding the present with a knowledge of its past, thereby serving as a guide in the future. See Earle E. Cairns, *Christianity Through the Centuries: A History of the Christian Church*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 21.

1. Patristic and Medieval Commentators

Many of the resources that the early church fathers provide on Luke's gospel consist of sermons, theological treatises, pastoral letters, and catechetical material. A good example can be seen in Origen of Alexandria whose homilies appear to be some of the oldest ancient commentaries on Luke. Thirty-three of his thirty-nine homilies on Luke focus on the first four chapters which were preached during morning/evening prayer assemblies and written during his Caesarean period of ministry. As it pertains to the "poor" in Luke 4:18, Origen reads the term figuratively. He contends that the poor represented the "Gentiles" who possessed nothing. They did not have the Law, the prophets, or any of the virtues. Similarly, he interprets the references to being "captive" and "blind" figuratively as well. In his own words, Origen said, "For what reason did God send him to preach to the poor? 'To preach release to captives.' For many years Satan bound us, held us captive and subject to himself. Jesus has come 'to proclaim release to captives and sight to the blind.'"⁴²

Cyril of Alexandria also gave attention to Luke, preaching one-hundred-fifty sermons on this gospel. He appears to have read Luke 4:18 like Origen viewing the "poor" as Gentiles who were deprived of the spiritual benefits that Israel originally had access to via the Law and the prophets. Cyril claims that Jesus preached to all who lacked "spiritual riches," which leads him to follow Origen in describing "captives" and the "blind" figuratively. He claims that Christ "...set the captives free; having overthrown the apostate tyrant Satan, he shed the divine and spiritual light on those whose heart was darkened... It was he who took the chains of sin off of those whose heart was crushed by them."⁴³ So, in both cases, these Christian Alexandrians interpreted Isaiah's depictions of being poor, captive, and blind as referencing the spiritual wasteland inhabited by unbelieving Gentiles.⁴⁴

Moving forward to the medieval period, two commentaries on Luke 4:18 recorded in homily form are particularly insightful. One is by the Venerable Bede who comments on the poor in Luke 4:18, equating the blessedness of the poor with the kingdom of heaven because it belongs to

⁴²Origen, *Homilies on the Gospel of Luke 32.4–5*, in *Fathers of the Church: A New Translation*, trans., Joseph T. Lienhard (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1996), 94:131–32.

⁴³Cyril of Alexandria, "Homily 12," in *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, trans., R. Payne Smith (Long Island, NY: Studion, 1983), 94–95.

⁴⁴However, during this period, there is also a significant parallel in the works of Eusebius. He claims that the preaching of the Gospel to the "poor" in Luke 4:18 aligns with the "poor in spirit" in Matthew 5:3 in the Sermon on the Mount. See Eusebius, *Proof of the Gospel*, trans. W. J. Ferrar (London: SPCK, 1920; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 3.188C–89A.

them.⁴⁵ Bede referred to the spiritual condition of the poor, saying that "...a broken and a contrite heart God will not despise... He is sent to heal the broken hearted, as it is written, Who heals the broken hearted. Or, to set at liberty them that are bruised; i.e., to relieve those who had been heavy laden with the intolerable burden of the Law."⁴⁶ Bede continues to elaborate on the spiritual condition of the poor before God, revealing their lowliness of spirit and their need to receive the Good News proclaimed by Jesus.

The other contributor that we will mention is the Byzantine commentator, Theophylact of Ohrid. Commenting on Luke 4:18, Theophylact describes the spiritual condition of the poor when referencing Jesus' claims in the Nazarene synagogue. The state of the poor who Isaiah described and were later present in Jesus' day,

...may be understood also of the dead, who being taken captive have been loosed from the dominion of hell by the resurrection of Christ. It follows, and recovering of sight to the blind. Or, to set at liberty them that are bruised; i.e., to relieve those who had been heavy laden with the intolerable burden of the Law.⁴⁷

Theophylact's point is that Jesus' mission to the poor, the blind, and the captive was to deliver them from sin and Satanic tyranny.

2. The Reformation

Among the many Protestant leaders who spearheaded the various traditions that emerged from the Reformation, John Calvin and certain Anabaptist thinkers bequeathed important observations about the meaning of the poor in Luke 4:18. Calvin, for example, omits any significant treatment on the social status of the materially "poor" in his commentary on this passage. While he does not exclude the reality that there are those who suffer from the ills of poverty, he sees the impetus of Isaiah's language as primarily focusing upon one's need for divine salvation. This leads Calvin to emphasize the state of the church before the Gospel and the condition of sinners without Christ. Descriptors like being poor, blind, and in captivity allude to humanity's condition apart from grace. So, while it is true that people can be oppressed by these miseries literally, it is their unregenerate blindness, satanic slavery, and the curse of death that puts them in a true state of folly. Therefore, they are worthy of Christ's

⁴⁵The Venerable Bede's comments can be found in a collection by Thomas Aquinas in a *Commentary on the Four Gospels*, in *Catena Aurea* 22 vols., (London: James Parker and Co., 1874; reprint, Aeterna Press, 2015), chapter 4.

⁴⁶Ibid.

⁴⁷Ibid. The same source where the Venerable Bede's comments are made about Luke 4 also includes insights from Theophylact as well.

pity and mercy because they are destitute of all hope.⁴⁸ Anabaptist readings of the poor in Luke 4:18 correspond with this type of interpretation as well. Many of them viewed the idea of being “poor in spirit” as being a spiritual prerequisite to receiving salvation. A good example can be seen in the writings of Hans Denck who connects the poor in spirit with those who also mourn, are meek, hunger and thirst after righteousness, and yearn to be peacemakers.⁴⁹ He claims that God makes us aware of our own misery so that we may call upon him in our despair, in our spiritual poverty you might say.⁵⁰

3. Nineteenth-Century Preachers: D. L. Moody and Charles Spurgeon

The nineteenth century is often called the evangelical era because of the massive amount of Protestant missionary endeavors that occurred during this time. There were influential preachers and pastors who helped contribute to the evangelistic success of this period—two, in particular, being D. L. Moody and Charles Spurgeon. Both of these men had much to say about the relationship between meeting the physical needs of the lowly and addressing their need for personal conversion. Moody, in fact, preached a sermon on part of Luke 4:18 entitled “The Friend of the Sorrowing.” His sermon connects Isaiah’s language of “binding up the brokenhearted” to the sorrows of major Old Testament characters such as Adam, Jacob, and David. Then Moody draws further parallels between the difficulties that these figures faced and the hardships that several of his acquaintances were experiencing. They were from all walks of life but were all equally heartbroken over various circumstances. Moody said that “...there was a time when I used to visit the poor, that I thought that all the broken hearts were to be found among them; but within the last few years I have found there are as many broken hearts among the learned as the unlearned, the cultured as the uncultured, the rich as the poor.”⁵¹ Moody’s point is that being brokenhearted, or even poor in spirit, primarily pertained to an inward thirst for comfort that can only be quenched by embracing the gospel’s message of redemption. This is why, throughout the sermon, Moody offered the invitation for both the monetarily rich and poor to cast their burdens upon Christ so they could find forgiveness and healing.⁵²

⁴⁸John Calvin, *Harmony of the Gospels: Matthew, Mark and Luke and James and Jude*, ed. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance (reprint; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 147–48.

⁴⁹See these points in the work of Balthasar Hubmaier, *Balthasar Hubmaier: Theologian of Anabaptism*, ed. H. Wayne Pipken and John H. Yoder (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1989), 365.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 151–52.

⁵¹D. L. Moody, *The Best of D. L. Moody: Sixteen Sermons by the Great Evangelist*, ed. Wilbur M. Smith (Chicago: Moody Press, 1971), 80.

⁵²*Ibid.*, 79–87.

Spurgeon also echoes these sentiments in two distinct sermons. One directly addresses Luke's quotation of Isaiah in chapter 4.⁵³ Spurgeon breaks the sermon into three parts with the first speaking of what he calls "heart wounds." His point here is that there are all kinds of events in life that can bring one to despair and Christ offers to deliver repentant sinners from such hopelessness. He then speaks of "heavenly healing" by which he means that Christ can mend the human heart regardless of what life event(s) has broken it. Interestingly enough, Spurgeon dismisses the idea that Luke's quotation is talking about a nebulous idea of "spiritual brokenness." Instead, Spurgeon goes through a list of adverse events that can bring great pain into a human life, claiming that the quotation of Isaiah refers to Christ's ability to rescue sinners from every one of them. He finally concludes with the third point that Christ is the "honored physician," meaning he is the one anointed from heaven so he can heal repentant sinners from the pains caused by sinful adversities on earth.

The other sermon entitled, "Preaching for the Poor," focuses on Jesus' mentioning of the poor in Matthew 11:5. The main point of this message is that Jesus' role as the Messiah was not only verified by the miracles he performed but also because he fulfilled Isaiah's promise that God's anointed would preach to the poor. In Spurgeon's own words, "This, also, was one evidence that he was Messiah. For Isaiah, the great Messianic prophet, had said, 'He shall preach the gospel to the meek; And in that Jesus did so, it was proved that he was the man intended by Isaiah.'"⁵⁴ Thus, Spurgeon interpreted the poor to mean the meek. Whether they be the lowly masses in Israel during the first century or those sitting in New Park Street Church or wandering the streets of London during Spurgeon's day, he viewed the poor as all of those in spiritual desperation who needed to be reached evangelistically and disciplined. Still, as it pertained to the literal "poor," Spurgeon thought they could be the first class of people who would receive the gospel, which would then be subsequently followed by other classes of people doing the same.

V. NEW VIEWS IN TWENTIETH AND EARLY TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY THOUGHT: CLASSICAL LIBERALISM, LIBERATION THEOLOGY, AND ECUMENICAL PERSPECTIVES

Now one should notice a key feature up to this point in our historical overview. There has been virtually no discussion about significant rifts

⁵³Charles Haddon Spurgeon, "Heart Disease Curable: Isaiah 61:1," No. 1604, Delivered on June 19, 1881 at The Metropolitan Tabernacle, Newington. [on-line], accessed 26 June 2021; available at <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/spurgeon/sermons27.xxx.html>; Internet.

⁵⁴Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *Spurgeon's Sermons*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), 150.

between Christian traditions on how to balance the imperatives to meet the immediate physical needs of the poor while also proclaiming the gospel so their deeper need for salvation can be met. For the most part, the former task is viewed as an essential ministry of the church, but by itself it is insufficient. Whether people are delivered from their literal poverty or not, it has no direct bearing on their eternal destiny while their faith in Christ or lack thereof does. When the church approached the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, however, considerable debates emerged regarding the priority of the former over the latter.

As mentioned earlier, one major missiologist who spent much of his time engaging this disagreement was David Bosch. So much so that the World Council of Churches, Evangelical Fellowship, and the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization all acknowledged his work as a bridge in the twentieth century.⁵⁵ Part of his influence derived from his famous contention that Luke 4:16–21 and its related description of Christ's mission should be viewed as a primary text that defines the mission of the church, thereby replacing the previous appeals that many evangelicals made on the Great Commission text as described in Matthew 28:18–20. Many theologians and church practitioners had come to embrace this idea.⁵⁶ The main reason being that advocates believed one could not divorce the Great Commission (Matt 28:18–20) from the Great Commandment (Matt 22:37–40), which mandates social involvement.⁵⁷ Whereas a classical or traditional view of the church's mission prioritized evangelism over social engagement, a growing trend was surfacing that believed this approach required revision. The church should instead place equal attention on opposing social injustices, and for some proponents, this objective was even more important than evangelistic outreach.

This perspective gradually resulted in a great divide between two schools of thought: one that stressed evangelism as a priority whereas the other demanded equal attention to social action. Founding Dean of the School of World Mission at Fuller Seminary, Donald McGavran, recognized this impasse as it unfolded in the divergent views of the World Council of Churches and the Lausanne Committee on World Evangelization. He pointed out that a methodological divergence was becoming evident within broader ecumenical coalitions. One example of this was between the World Council of Churches, which stressed the importance of social work over evangelism, and the Lausanne Committee on World Evangelization, which prioritized evangelism over social engagement.⁵⁸ This developing ethos that began to downplay evangelistic

⁵⁵Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, xiii.

⁵⁶Arthur P. Johnston, *The Battle for World Evangelism* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1978), 84.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, 81.

⁵⁸Delos Miles, "Church Social Work and Evangelism as Partners," in *Evangelism in the Twenty-First Century: The Critical Issues*, ed. Thom S. Rainer (Wheaton: Harold Shaw, 1989), 51.

endeavors sparked multiple theological trajectories which still impact discussions about the church's mission to this day. Two examples worth noting here are Walter Rauschenbusch, who stands as one of the major contributors to the early twentieth-century social gospel movement, and Gustavo Gutiérrez, a well-known Dominican theologian who serves as one of the initial pioneers of Liberation Theology.

1. Walter Rauschenbusch

Rauschenbusch, who was a Baptist and son of a German minister, emerged in the early twentieth century as the pastor of "Hell's Kitchen" in New York City and eventually became known as the "Father of the Social Gospel." This moniker was attributed to him because of his response to social and economic difficulties caused by the problems related to northern industrialism. Out of concern for his people who were experiencing severe hardships during this period, Rauschenbusch concluded that the message of Jesus applied to the problems of society as well as the needs of individuals.⁵⁹ He produced two books delineating his views, *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (1907) and *A Theology of the Social Gospel* (1917). His volume on *Christianity and the Social Crisis* displays the debt he felt toward the working people of New York City. He attempted to explain "how to wed Christianity and the social movement, since faithful working people were affected by both."⁶⁰ The extremity of the industrial context in Rauschenbusch's day altered his perception of the church's mission and task.⁶¹ He believed that the crisis of a given society was the church's crisis as well. The problem was that the church had become paralyzed through an unjust absorption of wealth while many people in society were experiencing severe poverty. Rauschenbusch claimed such a church could not thrive with this kind of social decay being ignored. This situation was also exacerbated by Rauschenbusch's belief that people absorb sinful habits through the adaptation of social customs, groups, and institutions.⁶² Hence the need to provide a radical ethic that could counter the unethical climate in which he lived. A new kind of culture had to replace the current one. It is here where Rauschenbusch thought there was reason to hope. He saw the adversities of his day as being providential because they created a great opportunity for the church to reclaim its calling to help contribute to a better society.⁶³

⁵⁹However, the social gospel did not address the social problems of the South including racism, sharecropping, and healthcare. For the most part, it ignored them. H. Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage: Four Centuries of Baptist Witness* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1987), 598.

⁶⁰Donald K. Gorrell, *The Age of Social Responsibility: The Social Gospel in the Progressive Era 1900–1920* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1988), 55–56.

⁶¹Ibid., 56.

⁶²Ibid., 266–69.

⁶³Ibid.

Rauschenbusch contended that the solution to this problem was a proper understanding of the kingdom of God. This kingdom was indicative of a certain social ethic that was central to Jesus' teaching. Rauschenbusch thought Jesus was primarily a teaching prophet who offered a social order that countered all other kingdoms. He was "...preparing men for the righteous social order. The goodness which he sought to create in men was always the goodness that would enable them to live rightly with their fellow-men and to constitute a true social life."⁶⁴ So, Rauschenbusch argued that the task of the church was to promote this humanitarian ethic of God's kingdom to the extent that it gradually overcame the social ills of all present-day kingdoms. What made this perspective distinct was that the gospel initiative of the church was being couched in the biblical language of the kingdom of God/heaven to promote a specific goal of social justice that resonated with some who felt exploited by the powers that be. In time, this clear downplaying of evangelistic impetus in Rauschenbusch's theology later became intrinsic to mainstream liberal views of salvation and the church.

2. Gustavo Gutiérrez

Another major shift in understanding the church's mission that has grown over the last few decades pertains to various strands of what is known today as Liberation Theology. One of the most influential progenitors of this concept is a Peruvian Dominican Priest named Gustavo Gutiérrez. His contributions are significant to our discussion because of his persistent appeal to Luke 4:18 in the development of his theological outlook.⁶⁵ Gutierrez defines his use of Luke 4:18–19:

Accepting the kingdom of God means refusing a world that instigates or tolerates the premature and unjust deaths of the poor. It means rejecting the hypocrisy of a society that claims to be democratic but violates the most elementary rights of the poor. It means rejecting the cynicism of the powerful of this world. To be a disciple one must proclaim the liberation of captives and good news to the poor (Luke 4:18–19); one must raise the hopes of people that suffer the age-old injustice.⁶⁶

The basic premise of liberation approaches is to read and interpret Scripture (as well as history, philosophy, and every other discipline) through the eyes of the oppressed. Such a practice enables one to see that

⁶⁴Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (New York: Macmillan, 1907), 67.

⁶⁵William M. Ramsay, *Four Modern Prophets* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1986), 57–60.

⁶⁶Gutierrez, Gustavo, *The God of Life*, trans., Matthew J. O'Connell, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 102–03.

God consistently defends the poor, the marginalized, and the outcasts.⁶⁷ So, in Luke 4:18 where Jesus quotes from Isaiah, the oppressed Jewish people of his day heard a declaration that a new exodus was on the horizon which would provide for the literal poor, restore the brokenhearted who had been cast down by society, and deliver all the captives who were being victimized by abusive imperial powers. Similar to the first exodus of God's people from Egypt (Exod 5:1) or God's consistent condemnation of the rich when they oppressed the poor (e.g., Jer 22:13, 15–16), Gutiérrez argues that Jesus was claiming to continue God's mission of sociopolitical liberation.⁶⁸

Gutiérrez grounds this theological approach in the reciprocation of three central concepts.⁶⁹ One is the recognition that the aspirations of oppressed peoples naturally clash with those who possess wealth and power. A second component, which is an outflow of this conflict, is that everyone must acknowledge their own responsibility to face this tension and pursue the betterment of society. This leads to the third factor which is that Scripture presents Christ as the one who can liberate us from all the sinful structures and behaviors that feed the injustices of the world. He delivers us from sin so individuals as well as society can be empowered to treat each other with compassion and righteousness.⁷⁰ To become a follower of Christ then is, in Gutiérrez's own words "...to commit oneself to the process of the liberation of the poor and oppressed, to commit oneself lucidly, realistically and concretely."⁷¹ For Gutiérrez this means applying oneself to the love for one's neighbor so that a qualitatively different society is created.⁷²

3. Ecumenical and Evangelical Movements in the Twentieth Century

It was amidst these developments in the twentieth century that Arthur P. Johnston sounded an alarm among evangelicals. He compared the theological trajectories of traditional evangelical approaches to evangelism and missions with the newly developing approaches of many larger mainline ecumenical coalitions. He contrasted evangelical views of the gospel against other "social gospel" ideologies and other approaches as seen at Madras (1938) and Lausanne (1974). He also traced the growing missions movement in Berlin (1966) back to the mission conference in New York (1900), which was at the end of the great century of Protestant missions. Johnston used this survey as a backdrop to highlight a drift caused by pluralistic and progressive theologies that were

⁶⁷Ramsay, *Four Modern Prophets*, 58–59.

⁶⁸*Ibid.*, 62–66.

⁶⁹Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, trans., Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1973), 36–37.

⁷⁰*Ibid.*, 37.

⁷¹*Ibid.*, 205.

⁷²Ramsay, *Four Modern Prophets*, 65.

stifling evangelistic outreach.⁷³ The tendency, according to Johnston, was to expand the mission of the church so that there could be broader ecumenical cooperation within organizations like the World Council of Churches. However, these endeavors often minimized classical views of evangelism, hence the adoption of “holistic evangelism,” or the idea that Christian missions are concerned with salvation *and* justice.⁷⁴ This marked a significant transition among denominational leaders and missiologists on the nature of the gospel itself. As opposed to a “classical” view of mission that historically had been conversion-centric, this new competing “holistic” approach was teetering on the ledge of becoming sociopolitico-centric. Whether it be through the social gospel framing of the kingdom of God, the deliverance from oppression motif of Liberation theology, or the expansion of missions’ objectives for the sake of ecumenical solidarity, the mission of the church was being defined in terms that sometimes equated evangelism with social action, or at least viewed them as being equal objectives for the church to fulfill.

4. Luke 4:18 and the Mission of the Church: The Conversation Continues

The contours of this discussion continue to evolve as evangelicals struggle with ways to articulate the relationship between Christ’s original mission as depicted in texts like Luke 4:18 (with its reference to Isa 61:1) and the task he gave his disciples that is recorded in Matthew 28. Again, as we stated earlier, many read Luke’s account of Jesus’ appeal to Isaiah 61 and interpret the features figuratively. Being poor, captive, blind, and oppressed are all terms that describe the bondage people experience because of the fallen age in which they live and the sinful condition in which they exist. This is not to say these words cannot be referring to literal physical maladies and oppression. But external conditions do not mitigate against the fact that these external hardships are indicative of the deeper spiritual suffering that humanity faces outside of God’s provision of grace.⁷⁵ This is why evangelicals like DeYoung and Gilbert support a classical view of the church’s mission that prioritizes evangelism as opposed to prominent ecumenical readings of Luke 4:18 which prioritize the church’s energies in meeting the physical needs of the poor.⁷⁶

⁷³Johnston, *Battle for World Evangelism*, 17–18.

⁷⁴*Ibid.*, 18.

⁷⁵DeYoung and Gilbert, *Mission of the Church*, 38–39. A similar reading can be seen in the work of Ronald Sider who focuses on the integration of social action with the mission of Jesus and how it relates to the church. Sider contends that Jesus’ ministry to the poor meant that he came to those in a humble state who were waiting for God’s provision. See Ronald Sider, *One Sided Christianity? Uniting the Church to Heal a Lost and Broken World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 146.

⁷⁶DeYoung and Gilbert, *Mission of the Church*, 37.

This latter approach is advocated by church practitioners like James Engel and William Dyrness.⁷⁷ Their work engages this conversation in light of three alternatives that are now proposed by various church leaders. One sees social transformation as a natural by-product of successful evangelistic outreach first. Another approach sees social transformation as an initial bridge that can lead to various evangelistic opportunities. Finally, another viewpoint is that social transformation is a full equal objective alongside evangelism. Engel and Dyrness affirm the third view by arguing that evangelism and social transformation are inseparable elements in Christ's kingdom that embrace all of creation. They are, in fact, in equal partnership.⁷⁸ This leads Engel and Dyrness to argue that the church should seek "...strategies to extend the kingdom by infiltrating all segments of society, with preference given to the poor, and allowing no dichotomy between evangelism and social transformation (Luke 4:18–19)."⁷⁹

One can see amidst these discussions that the meaning of "the poor" is debated constantly. So much so that famous missiologist David Hesselgrave once offered a helpful taxonomy for categorizing prominent positions, those being what he calls radical liberationism, holism, and prioritism.⁸⁰ The first approach, which again corresponds to perspectives advocated by thinkers like Gutiérrez, sees the church's mission in terms that aggressively promote justice in society and establish *Shalom* on the earth.⁸¹ What often makes this approach so controversial is its adaptation of a Marxist view of class struggle that pits one group that is perceived as the oppressor with power against a lower class who are being oppressed. This feature leads proponents to believe churches should espouse strategies that attempt to address unjust structures which enable power classes to exploit the poor. Some advocates even support tactics that incite revolution or violence if it means the perceived power class will be defeated.⁸²

In contrast, the holistic approach Hesselgrave mentions is espoused by theologians and pastors who want to strike some sort of mediating balance between word (i.e., the faithful proclamation of the gospel) and deed (i.e., meeting the physical and emotional needs of poor hurting people). Some do so by contending that churches must minister to the needs of the "whole" person. This means spiritual needs should not be seen as deserving exclusive attention because there are multiple ways in which people need healing and restoration. Others go further by stressing

⁷⁷James E. Engel and William A. Dyrness, *Changing the Minds of Missions, Where Have We Gone Wrong?* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 79–80.

⁷⁸*Ibid.*, 93.

⁷⁹*Ibid.*, 80.

⁸⁰David J. Hesselgrave, *Paradigms in Conflict*, expanded ed., ed. Keith Eitel (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2018), 122.

⁸¹*Ibid.*

⁸²This summary of liberationism can be found in Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1998), 1016–17.

the transformation of entire cultures, societies, and the world by forming ecumenical partnerships. Those who are sympathetic to this version of holism often see missions in ways that avoid any meaningful distinction between physical vs. spiritual needs. Evangelism and social action are equal partners that have inseparable goals. Some contend for more restrained versions of holism that try to nuance strategies that give primacy to evangelism without downplaying the importance of social engagement. John Stott summarizes this approach when he states that "...mission denotes the self-giving service which God sends his people into the world to render, and includes both evangelism and sociopolitical action; that within this broadly conceived mission a certain urgency attaches to evangelism, and priority must be given to it."⁸³

The third perspective of prioritism views evangelism and discipleship as the central tasks of the church with only secondary attention given to social ministry. Here spiritual transformation is prioritized over physical transformation, provisional care for the spirit/soul is more critical than meeting bodily needs, and evangelism is always more pressing than social action. It would be reductionistic, however, to infer from this that prioritism neglects social ministry altogether or denies the cross-cultural work intrinsic to evangelistic witness.⁸⁴ Proponents of this position do not deny the importance of meeting people's immediate needs. In fact, they often spearhead ministries that do just that. Yet these ventures are not equated with reaching people for Christ evangelistically. Thus, evangelicals like Eckhard Schnabel emphasize the point that Jesus' original mission included his calling disciples to be "fishers of people" (i.e., evangelism) and go make disciples of all peoples.⁸⁵ Similarly, Andreas Köstenberger and Peter O'Brien echo this view of Jesus' mission when they interpret our primary text under investigation, Luke 4:18–19. They state that Jesus was,

...conscious that he has been sent from heaven for his mission to 'preach the good news' of God's rule, and to proclaim 'release' to the captives, a release which is first and foremost 'the forgiveness of sins.' In other words, it is a picture of total forgiveness and salvation just as the expression had become in Isaiah 61.⁸⁶

⁸³John R. W. Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World, What the Church Should Be Doing Now* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1975), 58. Stott based this summary partly on a new understanding of mission that focuses on John 20:21 as the most important statement in the Great Commission. He equates the mission of Jesus (Luke 4:18–19) as the model for the mission of the church (John 20:21). See Hesselgrave, *Paradigms in Conflict*, 119–21.

⁸⁴Hesselgrave, *Paradigms in Conflict*, 121.

⁸⁵Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, vol. 2 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 1580–81.

⁸⁶Andreas J. Köstenberger and Peter T. O'Brien, *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth, A Biblical Theology of Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 264.

Now in light of the fact that Jesus served as a missionary *par excellence*, the church furthers his work in the power of the Spirit by proclaiming the gospel to the poor and the rich so they can all become followers of Christ and members of his kingdom (Matt 28:18–20; Luke 24:46–47).

VI. CONCLUSION

The analysis we have provided helps set the stage for our final reflections. We can see from our exegetical and historical treatment of Luke 4:18 that two key factors stand out the most when discussing the mission of the church today. One is that the meaning of the “poor” in Isaiah 61:1 and its quotation in Luke 4:18 impacts how one understands Jesus’ original Messianic mission. Was his task directed specifically at those without financial means, those who were desperate spiritually and looking for God’s help, or some combination of the two? If the “poor” refers to those in physical as well as spiritual need, do these plights have equal bearing, or does one take priority, and if so, which one? The other realization that follows is that one must decide whether the great commission takes up the mantle of Jesus’ original task or is it something distinct. We have mentioned several trajectories that overlap and share mutual points of agreement on these matters. But we have also highlighted significant disagreements as well.

Therefore, we offer three basic points in hope of furthering this conversation for the betterment of the church and reaching the nations for Christ. First, the focus on the “poor” in Isaiah 61 and Luke 4 does have a dual referent. On the one hand, it is difficult to deny that Isaiah is referring to people who do not have physical resources to meet their needs. The subsequent images in Isaiah’s prophecy regarding those who are brokenhearted, enslaved in captivity, and imprisoned convey experiences that are encountered because of the abuse of others, especially those in exile. This is at least partly why Jesus on occasion ministered to those with physical needs. He fed the five thousand so they would not starve and instructed Peter on the shores of Galilee to cast his nets so he and his colleagues could have a massive catch of fish to provide for their families. Yet, on the other hand, it is equally clear that the language of being poor does include the idea of having a deep abiding need inwardly. Being poor is descriptive of those in dire straits not simply because they may or may not have money. They are desperate for the Lord to bring peace to their souls. We see this in the fact that Jesus did not address all the sociopolitical matters that could resolve poverty at a grand scale. He did consistently offer rest for the spiritually weary and extend forgiveness to the morally downtrodden. He always shared these mercies with those who repented regardless of whether they were poor monetarily. One could be rich or poor fiscally and still be poor before the Lord.

This leads to a second feature we must emphasize, which is that there are elements of discontinuity and continuity between Jesus' original task and the subsequent mission of the church. The main factor that distinguishes these two is the fact that it is Jesus and he alone who accomplishes the work of redemption, not the church. It is he who is the very basis for the good news that will be heralded to the poor. He is the one who exercises heavenly authority over sin, provides atonement for sin, and defeats the curse of sin in his death and resurrection. Likewise, he is the one who will usher in a new creation where poverty, blindness, and death will be done away. Where Jesus' accomplished work and the great commission do converge is in the proclamation of that work so that the Spirit can draw people and disciples can be made. Then as converts from all tribes and tongues receive a foretaste of the age to come because they have new spiritual eyes and are delivered from Satan and sin, they can live in hope of the eschaton wherein all the physical and social pains of the present age will be done away.

Third, the church must always make evangelism and discipleship a priority in its mission while not forgetting to show compassion for the immediate external needs of those who are suffering. Compassion meets the need. It includes both the physical and spiritual needs of people. When the church meets the physical needs of people, it leads to meeting their greatest need which is spiritual.⁸⁷ Christianity has always been a grassroots movement that ministers to the hurting and vulnerable. This is not to say that the church has always done this consistently or that there have not been many unfortunate examples of failure by the church. Nevertheless, historically many hospitals, schools, shelters, charities, and other benevolent parachurch organizations have been started to serve those at the bottom of cultural and social ladders. The key that should always be kept in mind, though, is that these ministries should be in place so people can see the love of Christ externally with the hope that they will experience the larger picture of that love in personal salvation. Social ministry in and of itself without the larger concern for a person's spiritual condition can distract the church from its mission and thereby become dangerous if left unchecked. The reason for this is because meeting the physical needs of someone without ever sharing Christ lacks a proper view of eternity. But sharing Christ without any concern for someone's immediate external needs falls short of the example Jesus set when he showed compassion for someone's pain because he knew it was indicative of a deeper spiritual need. Therefore, the church must strive to strike the proper balance between these two dynamics and always be aware of where the deepest need lies, namely an empty fallen soul who needs a savior.

⁸⁷For fresh insights on this facet of ministry for pastors specifically, see my thoughts in "Pastoral Reflections: Compassion Meets the Need," in *Shepherding Like Jesus*, Andrew C. Hébert (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2022), 130.