

# Widows, Orphans, and Pure Religion

By Michelle Tiffany Sanchez

I often wonder what it will be like once I finally find myself before the Judgment Seat of Christ. When the Lord looks back at my life, what will stand out as my most outstanding achievements? Will I be surprised by his assessment of my “righteousness”? Will I discover that his values are quite different from the stereotypical values of the Western “Christian” world? What will that moment be like?

To be honest, I have not imagined that on that day the Lord will look deep into my eyes and ask, “So, what have you done to care for widows and orphans in their distress?” Yet that is exactly what Scripture suggests he will do.

## The Great Commission vs. the Great Commandment?

Of course, in one way or another, most Christians are well-aware that the Bible addresses issues of poverty and injustice. Yet, we as evangelicals tend to think that the key to righteousness is *right belief*.

Strictly speaking, this is correct. We cherish the fact that the righteous shall live by faith (Heb. 10:38). This was the dazzling truth Martin Luther recovered and that sparked the Protestant Reformation along with an extended period of renewed spiritual vitality. We are justifiably relieved by the good news that our salvation is a gift from God, received through simple faith and not works of righteousness (Eph. 2:8–9). Our eternal life with Christ is guaranteed if we confess him as Lord and believe that God raised him from the dead (Rom. 10:9).

Evangelicals have characteristically emphasized right belief, especially in the twentieth century. We embrace the *Great Commission* as our all-encompassing mandate: “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them

to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:19–20).

Yet, despite this firm Scriptural basis about the importance of right belief, there are also many “troubling” passages in the Bible which seem to suggest that the key to righteousness is *right behavior*.

Take the book of James for example. James’ emphasis on works as a basis for righteousness is indisputable. In fact, Martin Luther found it difficult to reconcile the book of James with the Pauline emphasis on righteousness by faith, and he referred to James’ letter as the “Epistle of Straw.”

Indeed, James declared that “faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead” (James 2:17). He ridiculed the idea that right belief alone is sufficient for holy living: “You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder” (James 2:19). Here’s what James says is the heart of “pure” religion: “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and keep oneself from being polluted by the world” (James 1:27).

Jesus’ parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25 is another example of this emphasis on good works. On what basis will Jesus welcome people into eternal life on Judgment Day? According to his clear teaching in this parable, Jesus will welcome the “sheep”—those people who throughout their lives nourished the hungry, invited in strangers, clothed the naked, looked after the sick, and visited prisoners (Matt. 25:34–36). Strangely, Jesus mentions nothing about right belief in the entire parable.

Mainline and more “liberal” Christians have typically focused on this passage when they envision what God deems to be true righteousness. They prefer to emphasize the *Great Commandment* rather than the *Great Commission*, which calls us to love God and love our neighbors as ourselves (Matt. 22:37–40).

“Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress...”

— James 1:27 (TNIV)

Join these historical and contemporary church leaders who knew the meaning of pure religion



John Wesley      William Wilberforce      Catherine Booth      William Booth      Sarah Grimké      Angelina Grimké      Katharine Bushnell      Michele Rickett      Gloria White-Hammond

## Reconciling the historic “contradiction”

So what are we to make of this apparent “contradiction” between the Great Commission and the Great Commandment?

I believe one of the low points of recent church history was a conflict in the 1920s that historians now refer to as the “fundamentalist-modernist controversy.” Before this period, and especially in the nineteenth century, Christianity was marked by a vibrant emphasis on the importance of both evangelism and good works.

For example, John Wesley (1703–1791) founded the Methodist movement which birthed scores of influential leaders who were active in social justice. William Wilberforce (1759–1833), who was highly influenced by the Methodist movement as a young man, was later elected to the British parliament and successfully campaigned for the abolition of slavery in England. Methodist ministers Catherine Booth (1829–1890) and her husband William (1829–1912) founded the Salvation Army, an evangelistic and social services ministry to the “undesirables” of society such as alcoholics, drug addicts, and prostitutes. Other evangelical Christians of the era were at the front lines of abolitionism, prison reform, and women’s rights.

However, early in the twentieth century, disputes arose between Christians with different commitments. Those committed to biblical inerrancy and the historic fundamentals of the faith (the “fundamentalists”), opposed those willing to “modernize” the faith and relinquish certain historic beliefs such as the virgin birth and the bodily resurrection of Christ so that Christian faith would become more compatible with secularism and intellectualism (the “modernists.”) The fundamentalists tended to remain committed to evangelism while the modernists tended to emphasize good works, or what became known as the “social gospel.”

In time, the fundamentalist-modernist controversy led to many painful denominational splits. Today’s evangelicals are primarily the spiritual children of the fundamentalists. Similar to their forbears, evangelicals tend to be suspicious about good works since they fear it will lead to the watering down of the Great Commission. On the other hand, liberals are the children of the modernists. They tend to fear that overemphasis on evangelism will lead the Church to ignore the Great Commandment and issues of social justice.

Biblically speaking, these two concerns of faith and good works are absolutely not opposed; rather, they are both crucial for true righteousness. Within the Christian community and as individuals, we should commit to no longer making a choice between one or the other. The day has finally come when the rift between these two views of righteousness can once again be reconciled.

But how can both faith and good works be indicators of righteousness? Jesus’ teachings on fruitfulness can help clarify this paradox. Jesus did teach that the essence of eternal life is right belief (John 3:16, 17:3), but he also taught that the *evidence* of right belief is visible fruitfulness: “A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit....Thus by their fruit you will recognize them.” (Matt. 17:18, 20).

When we truly become one with Christ, abiding in him by faith, we produce fruit that will last (John 15:16) and become a way of life (Matt. 25:34–36). This fruit includes not only the characteristic fruit of the Holy Spirit (Gal. 5:22), but also effective evangelism (Matt. 28:19–20) and works of charity, compassion, and justice. This is why James declared that faith without works is dead: we are not *justified* by our works, but our works are *natural and visible proof* that our faith is genuine and truly rooted in Christ.

## God’s concern for the vulnerable

Now that we have established that both faith and good works are necessary for righteousness in God’s eyes, how then can we effectively demonstrate this in our lives?

Scripture is full of teaching that reveals God’s heart for the poor. After an extensive search through Scripture, Jim Wallis concluded: “We found several thousand verses in the Bible on the poor and God’s response to injustice...One of every sixteen verses in the New Testament is about the poor or the subject of money.”<sup>1</sup>

God’s concern for widows and orphans is a consistent theme throughout the Bible. This concern was enshrined in the covenant law God gave to the nation of Israel: “Do not take advantage of a widow or an orphan. If you do and they cry out to me, I will certainly hear their cry” (Exod. 22:22–23). The Israelites were also instructed to make regular provisions for widows and orphans through tithes and offerings (Deut. 14:28, 29; 26:12). The Psalms extol God’s defense of widows and orphans: “A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in his holy dwelling” (Ps. 68:5;

see also Pss. 11:17–18, 82:1–4, 146:7–9). Likewise, the prophets admonished God’s people to demonstrate their righteousness through the care of widows and orphans, and warned them of God’s impending judgment if they did not do so (Isa. 10:1–3; Jer. 7:5–7, 22:2–5; Zech. 7:9–11; Mal. 3:5).

I must admit that it still seems a bit quaint to me that even the New Testament describes the essence of “pure religion” as caring for widows and orphans (James 1:27). This emphasis makes more sense in some contexts than others. For example, I have friends involved in overseas ministries to street children, and I’m sure they

encounter many orphans that need care.

However, I usually don’t come across many homeless orphans in my own daily interactions. This, of course, is a cause for gratitude. Thankfully, most orphans in the United States are taken care of by our state governments. This is not to say that our social service systems are perfect—they are far from it. However, we certainly do have more extensive safety nets in place today than anything that was in place during biblical times.

Likewise, I don’t often come across many widows who are “in distress”—except, perhaps, emotionally. Again, modern insurance policies and state welfare programs generally do a good job of ensuring that most men and women are protected from utter financial ruin upon the death of their spouse.

In light of modern advances such as these, we may feel that our



Salvation Army co-founders Catherine (1829–1890) and William (1829–1912) Booth are an example of a married couple who practiced pure religion in their ministry together.

responsibility to care for “widows and orphans” has become unnecessary. However, this conclusion would be a gross misapplication of God’s Word. Like the Pharisees, this literal approach observes the “letter of the law” but certainly not the *spirit* of the law. Because we are no longer living two thousand years ago in ancient Israel, it may be helpful for us to reframe who widows and orphans might represent in our day and age. According to Donald E. Gowan, former professor of Old Testament at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary:

The widow is a person who has experienced a sudden, unplanned, undesirable change of fortune, from security to uncertainty. Orphans are people unable to help themselves because of their physical condition... Looking at these groups in this way may help us to appreciate their plight more fully in that we can identify parallels in our own culture...The worst problem, that which these groups have in common, is powerlessness and its consequences.<sup>2</sup>

So we might say that today’s “widows and orphans” are any people who are powerless in some way and therefore *vulnerable* to impoverishment and many forms of social injustice. Who might fall in this category in our day and age? The global list, of course, is nearly endless: homeless adults, street children, HIV/AIDS orphans, victims of sex trafficking and other forms of enslavement, genocide refugees, inner-city youth, the unborn, the uneducated and illiterate, and the list goes on.

## Who are your widows and orphans?

The fight for biblical equality and justice is at the heart of what Christians for Biblical Equality (CBE) stands for. Part of CBE’s Statement of Faith is: “We believe that men and women are to oppose injustice as mandated by the Bible” (see pg. 39 for the entire statement). If you are reading this magazine, then you’ve probably already taken up the mantle of contending for justice on behalf of women in the Church, home, and world.

However, like many of our evangelical forebears, we should also commit to opposing other forms of injustice, especially regarding the care and defense of the vulnerable. For example, Sarah (1792–1873) and Angelina (1805–1879) Grimké fought for women’s equality and were also prominent abolitionists. Catherine Booth published a treatise called *Female Ministry: Or, a Woman’s Right to Preach the Gospel* in addition to founding the Salvation Army and caring for the homeless and the poor. Katharine Bushnell (1856–1923) is best known for her book entitled *God’s Word to Women*, an early defense of women in ministry; however, she also worked tirelessly to shelter sick and dying prostitutes around the world.<sup>3</sup>

We also have many contemporary role models. While working part-time as a pediatrician and part-time as a minister, Rev. Dr. Gloria White-Hammond has traveled to the Sudan six times since 2001 to help purchase the freedom of 10,000 slaves. In 2002 she founded *My Sister’s Keeper* ([www.mskeeper.org](http://www.mskeeper.org)), a human rights group organized to support women in southern Sudan in the

reconciliation and reconstruction of their communities. Michele Rickett is founder of *Sisters in Service* ([www.sistersinservice.org](http://www.sistersinservice.org)), whose goal is to inform, mobilize, and equip advocates to extend God’s love to women and children through local partnerships in the least-reached places of the world.

Life is short, so we obviously cannot help every “widow and orphan” in need of our care. However, we can prayerfully go before the Lord and seek his will about a specific group of vulnerable people that he would have you serve and defend. Does a certain social injustice anger you more than others? Are there any pressing needs right in your own community? Have you experienced an injustice that you can help others recover from and resist? As you begin thinking and praying more about this biblical challenge, I would also recommend reading some of the incredible books on this subject to give you great ideas about

where and how to care for the vulnerable in our midst.<sup>4</sup>

Jesus clearly identified his mission in one of his first public addresses: “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:18–19). As the body of Christ in the world, the Church now has the responsibility to carry on Jesus’ mission of expanding the Kingdom of God by preaching the gospel, healing the sick, liberating the oppressed, and dismantling all forms of injustice. And, if we do, I believe that we will achieve the goal of practicing “pure religion” and certainly hear him say to us on that day: “Well done, good and faithful servant!” (Matt. 25:21).

### Notes

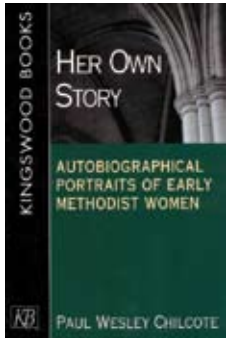
1. Jim Wallis, *God’s Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn’t Get It* (New York: Harper Collins, 2005), 212.
2. Donald E. Gowan, “Wealth and Poverty in the Old Testament: the Case of the Widow, the Orphan, and the Sojourner,” *Interpretation* 41.4 (1987): 341–353.
3. Dana Hardwick, *Oh Thou Woman That Bringest Good Tidings: The Life and Work of Catherine Bushnell* (Kearney, Neb.: Morris Publishing, 1995).
4. Some of my favorites include *Good News about Injustice*, by Gary A. Haugen; *Walking with the Poor: Principles and Practices of Transformational Development*, by Bryant L. Myers; and *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, by Ronald Sider. For more information see Evangelicals for Social Action ([www.esa-online.org](http://www.esa-online.org)) and the International Justice Mission ([www.ijm.org](http://www.ijm.org)).



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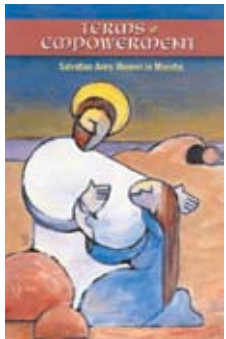


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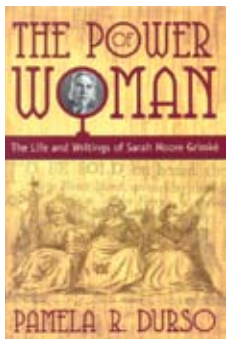


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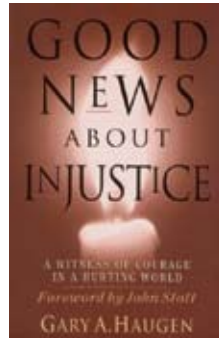


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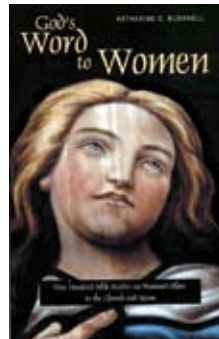
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Injustice is an abuse of power, taking from others what God has given them: their dignity, their freedom, their resources, and even their very lives. CBE also recognizes that prohibiting individuals from exercising their God-given gifts to further his kingdom constitutes injustice in a form that impoverishes the body of Christ and its ministry in the world at large. CBE accepts the call to be part of God's mission in opposing injustice as required in Scriptures such as Micah 6:8.

**CORE VALUES** • *We believe* the Bible teaches the equality of women and men. *We believe* God has given each person gifts to be used for the good of Christ's kingdom. *We believe* Christians are to develop and exercise their God-given gifts in home, church, and society. *We believe* the Bible teaches that Christians are to oppose injustice.

**MISSION STATEMENT** • CBE equips believers by affirming the biblical truth about equality and justice. Thus all believers, without regard to gender, ethnicity, and class, are free and encouraged to use their God-given gifts in families, ministries, and communities.

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*We believe* the Bible is the inspired Word of God, is reliable, and is the final authority for faith and practice.

*We believe* in the unity and trinity of God, eternally existing as three equal persons.

*We believe* in the full deity and full humanity of Jesus Christ.

*We believe* in the sinfulness of all persons. One result of sin is shattered relationships with God, others, and self.

*We believe* that eternal salvation and restored relationships are possible through faith in Jesus Christ who died for us, rose from the dead, and is coming again. This salvation is offered to all people.

*We believe* in the work of the Holy Spirit in salvation, and in the power and presence of the Holy Spirit in the life of believers.

*We believe* in the equality and essential dignity of men and women of all ethnicities, ages, and classes. We recognize that all persons are made in the image of God and are to reflect that image in the community of believers, in the home, and in society.

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*We believe* in the family, celibate singleness, and faithful heterosexual marriage as God's design.

*We believe* that, as mandated by the Bible, men and women are to oppose injustice.

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