Ministry at the Margins

Article for Unit 2

There have been people at the margins throughout history. The margins are described in economic, relational, moral, ethnic or physical terms, and are always interpreted through a cultural lens. People at the margins are seldom part of the “in” crowd. They lack access to resources or power. In the biblical era, the marginalized included the poor, the sick, oppressed slaves, strangers and aliens, the outcasts and ostracized of the ancient Near East.

At certain times and places in biblical history, the marginalized were more numerous than those at the center of life and culture. Historians speculate that as many as 90% of the population in first-century Palestine were known as “people of the land,” living without the provisions of economic stability, social acceptance, political power, or spiritual resource. Many did not own land. Those who did were subsistence farmers who relied on the success of a small harvest, with no security against drought or disease. Most lived in rural villages where they worked to scratch out a meager living, without access to urban commerce. Most lacked skills that allowed them a steady income beyond a single day’s wages, if they were blessed enough to be hired for a day. Even carpenters like Joseph (and later Jesus) were considered among the “people of the land.” The offering of a pair of doves and two young pigeons that Joseph and Mary gave at the temple in Jerusalem after Jesus’ birth (Luke 2:24) was one required of the poor.

Other people of the land lived on the margins because of their ethnicity, occupations, lifestyles, or physical conditions. This group included Samaritans, tax collectors, prostitutes, the diseased, and disabled. Reading the Gospels through the cultural lens of the “people of the land” reveals that Jesus spoke often about marginalized, used them as characters in His stories (e.g., day laborers in the vineyard, the good Samaritan, the tax collector at prayer), and had significant encounters with them. Religious insiders consistently criticized Jesus because He spent so much time ministering with people at the margins.

While it would be incorrect to reduce marginalization to poverty, the declaration in Deuteronomy 15:11 and Matthew 26:11 (TNIV), “There will always be poor people in the land,” could apply to the marginalized in every era and every region. But to say there are always people at the margins because of nothing significant can be done is a gross misinterpretation of the text and its intent. On the contrary, the people of ancient Israel and the church of Jesus Christ over the last twenty-one centuries have engaged in some of their most meaningful ministries at the margins.

Deuteronomy and Ministry at the Margins

The Old Testament teems with principles and practices of ministry at the margins. From Genesis to Malachi, the people of God were commanded to be alert to the needs of the poor who had meager means of supporting themselves, to be hospitable to the strangers and aliens who had wandered far from their homelands in search of security and survival, to care for orphans and widows whose social support systems had vanished, and to consider the plight of the sick and diseased who were often ostracized because of their physical condition. Repeatedly, God told the Israelites to remember they were once strangers and aliens, poor and oppressed in Egypt. Their ancestors knew firsthand what it meant to be powerless at the margins of a strange land. Remembering what was central to their thanksgiving for deliverance in the past and the blessings of the present. But it was also central to their compassion with those who were at the margins of their world.

This way of remembering and acting is especially significant to Deuteronomy. God, speaking through Moses, was preparing a new generation of Israelites who had been born in the Sinai wilderness to live faithfully in Canaan. This “law given again” (Deuteronomy 26:9) was God’s reminder of how they were to live continually as a reflection of God’s holy character. Among Moses’ instructions were ways to worship, live in healthy relationships, honor and conserve the land, and care for those who were at the margins.

Deuteronomy 15 includes instructions concerning the practice of cancelling debts in the sabbatical year so that the poor would be relieved of the burden of insurmountable financial obligation and released from the servitude that accompanied it. Forgiving debt was not a begrudging obligation, but was meant to instill a spirit of generosity toward the poor. “If anyone is poor among your people in any of the towns of the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward them. Rather, be openhanded and freely lend them whatever they need ... Give generously to them and do so without a grudging heart; then the Lord your God will bless you and all your work and in everything you put your hand to” (vv. 7-8, 10).

The “law of gleaning” (Deuteronomy 24:19-22) by which farmers were to leave a small portion of their fields, groves and vineyards to provide food for “the foreigner, the fatherless, and the widow.” While the law came with a promise of blessing to the owner, the explicit purpose was material provision for people at the margins.

God gave instructions concerning the tithe offering of the fruits of their harvests in the Promised Land (Deuteronomy 26). In the offering prayer (sometimes called the “Prayer of the Wandering Aramean”), the Lord asks the Israelites to recite their ancestral history of mistreatment, suffering and oppression in Egypt, to rejoice in their deliverance, and to extend the abundance of God’s provisions for others in need. “When you have finished setting aside a tenth of all your produce in the third year, the year of the tithe, you shall give
it to the Levites, the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow, so they may eat in your towns and be satisfied” (v. 13).

Common to all of these mandates of compassion was the reality that those in need were not far away, outside the geographic boundaries of Israel. The needy lived in the very towns and cities of those who had resources to share. The marginalized were their vulnerable neighbors.

**The Gospel of Luke and Ministry at the Margins**

No account of the life and teaching of Jesus exemplifies ministry at the margins more than the Gospel of Luke. The thread of “in Jesus, good news has come to the poor and the marginalized” weaves its way through its pages. Persons on the margins of first-century Jewish life came to the center of Jesus’ ministry and mission. Mary, a peasant adolescent, is selected to give birth to the incarnate God, yet sang an eternal song of praise, “My soul glorifies the Lord … He has filled the hungry with good things” (Luke 1:46, 53). Bethlehem’s shepherds worked on the fringes of Jerusalem’s temple culture, yet they were the first to bow down at the manger-throne of the King of Kings. Jesus announced in His first sermon the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy of good news to the poor, freedom for prisoners and captives, and sight for the blind—representing all the marginalized in Israel and beyond. Jesus touched the untouchables, healed the lame, the blind—representing all the marginalized in Israel and the marginalized” weaves its way through its pages.

Jesus received a sinful woman who bravely endured a religious critic’s scorn to worship at Jesus’ feet. He fed hungry masses with material bread from the earth and eternal bread from heaven. He cast out demons, healed the sick, and raised the dead. He made heroes of Samaritans, one a good neighbor and the other a grateful leper who had been cleansed. He celebrated when those who were “lost” at the margins of Israel’s life were found. Jesus invited himself to a small-statured and small-hearted wealthy tax collector in Jericho and brought salvation to Zacchaeus’ house and largeness to his soul. He honored a poor widow whose meager mite surpassed the wealthiest gift to the temple treasury. Even with His last breath, Jesus embraced a rebel and promised him paradise.

In response to John the Baptist’s inquiry concerning Jesus’ mission, Jesus replied, “Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard. The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor” (Luke 7:22).

It is difficult to read Luke carefully and miss the point. God, in Jesus Christ, has come for those on the margins of life, and has called His followers to do the same. But, as in Deuteronomy, the marginalized were not someplace else. They were where Jesus was, not because they found Him, but because He intentionally sought and found them. Jesus came to them so that they could come to Him.

**Christians and Ministry at the Margins**

One of the marks of the early Christians was their benevolence to the poor, the stranger, the sick, and the oppressed. Since then, Christians consistently have carried on the tradition of ministry at the margins globally and locally. They started and sustained more clinics and hospitals than any other non-governmental agency in the world. Many of the health care facilities were located in developing countries. Hospitals were an important component of the evangelical missionary movement of the late 19th and early 20th century. Many of the hospitals are still providing quality healthcare and spiritual resource.

For centuries, houses of refuge for orphans, the elderly, at-risk women, the addicted and the homeless have part and parcel of the impact of the holiness movement around the world. One holiness leader wrote, “no phase of Christian endeavor is more absolutely in harmony with the very heart throb of our Savior than the work of rescuing these fallen, friendless, unpitied ones.”

Christians have been on the front row of immigrant and refugee resettlement work, and prominently so in recent years with the numbers of people on the move increasing worldwide. When a natural disaster strikes anywhere in the world, Christian relief and recovery agencies are among the first to respond with material resources and professional expertise.

Churches and Christian organizations are on the front lines of many efforts to provide food, clothing, housing, counsel, healthcare, life skill development, companionship and other support ministries to their neighbors who live at the margins of their local communities. Some Christians have decided that the best way to minister in this way is to move into the neighborhood of the marginalized in the spirit of Deuteronomy and Jesus. This incarnational ministry with those at the margins may prove to be the most effective ministry of all.

Ministry at the margins should be natural for the people of God. It is our way. If we remember and respond as the Israelites did to the marginalized in Canaan; if we remember and respond as Jesus and His followers did with the marginalized in Israel; if we remember and respond like Christians have for centuries with the marginalized of our world across the globe and across the street, then we, too, will be living into that way.


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