

## **An Examination of Matthew 5:13–16; 28:19–20 on the Mission of the Church: A Case of the Church in the Democratic Republic of Congo**

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### **Abstract**

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The number of churches is increasing yearly in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). And the question that many people ask is, what is the impact of these churches in addressing contextual issues like corruption and injustices? There are different opinions on whose role it is to fight against these social evils. Some claim that the church's mission is solely to proclaim the gospel for the salvation of souls. They believe the church is a divine institution that must be concerned only with winning souls because people are perishing in ignorance of the gospel. In contrast, others believe that the mission of the church is to stabilise the community's social life by fighting against injustice. Therefore, this library-based paper clarifies the mission of the church through a textual analysis of Matthew 5:13–16 and 28:19–20. These two interconnected verses indicate that the disciples of Christ have a role beyond winning souls to Christ; they should be the salt and light of the world. The study is applied to the church in the DRC.

**Keywords:** Church, Mission, injustice, Evangelism, Discipleship, Great Commission, DRC

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### **Introduction**

There are two dimensions of the concept of “church,” as the apostle Paul clarified to Corinthians “To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours...” (1 Cor 1:2, ESV).<sup>1</sup> From this passage, theologians have argued that the church in every place is both local and universal. David Middleton rightly summarised “the universal church is invisible, while the local one is visible, and

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise stated, this and all subsequent references are from the English Standard Version, 2001.



members can interact.”<sup>2</sup> Fabrice Katembo states, “the invisible church, known only by God, is inclusive in the visible church composed by a group of people who gather together in a certain locality.”<sup>3</sup> This work focuses on the local church because, considering the context of the Democratic Republic of Congo, it seems like there is a need to redefine the mission of the church. The Bible states the identity and purpose of the church. Therefore, even though there is no perfect local church, a church can meet God’s expectations of its mission.

There are two main views concerning the church’s identity and mission as “salt of the earth and light of the world” (Matt 5:13-14). Some opine that the church should be involved in the battle for social justice. In this case, believers as “salt and light” are understood as a community of agents focusing on transforming society by fighting against corruption, poverty, injustice, and other problems for people’s socio-economic well-being. Kunhiyop believes this mission encompasses involvement in politics and government to bring about the desired change.<sup>4</sup> He believes Mathew 5:13-16 teaches that the mission of the church as the light of the world involves fighting the darkness of social injustice and corruption in the political sphere.

Contrastingly, others argue that the church’s mission is purely evangelism and discipleship. Here “salt and light” are understood as a community of people who prioritise winning souls through the proclamation of the gospel and discipleship so that people may be reconciled with God for their eternal security. Douglas Hare agrees with this and emphasises that “disciples are expected to influence others to come to Jesus and to receive salvation.”<sup>5</sup>

This paper argues for a balanced view acknowledging that the church is to proclaim the gospel to win souls and transform lives and communities. David Bosch clarified the distinction between these two mandates by saying:

Solving the problem of the relationship between evangelism and social responsibility is to distinguish between two different *mandates*, one spiritual and the other social. The first refers to the commission to announce the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ; the second calls Christians to responsible participation in human society, including working for human well-being and justice. So, by this

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<sup>2</sup> David Middleton, *Time to Unite*, (London: Evangelical Press, 1968), 38.

<sup>3</sup> Fabrice S. Katembo, *The Mystery of the Church: Applying Paul’s Ecclesiology in Africa* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: HippoBooks, 2020), 28.

<sup>4</sup> Samuel Waje Kunhiyop, *African Christian Theology* (Zondervan, 2019), 100.

<sup>5</sup> Douglas R. A. Hare, *Matthew*, Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1993), 44.



definition, evangelism relates to social responsibility as a seed relates to fruit; evangelism remains primary (the church's "main task"), but it generates social involvement and improved social conditions among those who have been evangelised.<sup>6</sup>

In summary, the mission of the church, as described in the Bible, is to make disciples; however, discipleship begins with the proclamation of the gospel but includes involvement in the people's social life. Therefore, the commitment to making disciples will produce a real transformation of the community in every area because disciples, as the light and salt, will never tolerate the darkness of social injustice wherever they are.

## Textual Analysis

### The Metaphor of Salt (Matt 5:13a)

The personal pronoun nominative plural Ὑμεῖς refers to the disciples, not the crowds. The disciples have a higher calling because they have received the kingdom of God. Several scholars, including Hans Betz, state that "the Sermon on the Mount never uses any collective terms, like "church," designing community, but it presupposes that the addressees are Jesus' disciples, a term that occurs at least once in Luke 6:26-28."<sup>7</sup> The emphatic 'you' points to contrast to those who oppose God's work in the world (5:11).<sup>8</sup> Hagner also correctly observes that "disciples are first identified as salt and light before being called to behave appropriately. That's to say, being precedes doing."<sup>9</sup> This is contrary to the view that not all Christians need to obey the injunctions of Matthew 5-7 because it was intended only for a special category of Christians, particularly the clergy.<sup>10</sup>

The shade of the ἐστε is durative present. Jesus Christ declares that disciples are salt, not for a limited time but continuously. They may be imperfect but still salt, despite the world's troubles. Jesus's statement Ὑμεῖς ἐστε τὸ ἅλας τῆς γῆς (You are the salt of the earth) does not give the possibility to disciples to choose who they are or need to be. Instead, it is the affirmation of their identity by their Master who knew them. Bonhoeffer rightly notes,

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<sup>6</sup> David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, 20th Anniversary edition (Orbis, 2011), 344-45.

<sup>7</sup> Hans Dieter Betz, ed., *The Sermon on the Mount: A Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount*, First Edition (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 155.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Tehan and David Abernathy, *An Exegetical Summary of The Sermon on the Mount, Second Edition*, 2nd edition (Dallas, TX: SIL International, 2008), 29.

<sup>9</sup> Donald A. Hagner, *Word Biblical Commentary Vol. 33a, Matthew 1-13 (Hagner)*, 483pp, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Inc, 1993), 98.

<sup>10</sup> Bosch, 69.



“Jesus does not say: ‘You must be the salt.’ It is not for the disciples to decide whether they will be the salt of the earth, for they are so, whether they like it or not, they have been made salt by the call they have received.”<sup>11</sup>

The figurative meaning (of salt) likely comes from the domestic use of salt, a necessary element in ancient world culture. The metaphor was common in antiquity because salt was used to flavour foods and even used in small doses as a fertiliser.<sup>12</sup> The word ἅλας, ἅλα or ἅλο (salt), is used eight times in the New Testament.<sup>13</sup> It was used as a preservative in civilisations without refrigeration. Jesus’ comparison suggests the disciples’ impact on moral degradation in a broken world.<sup>14</sup> The earth needs salt to stop the corruption of the devil-dominated system. Salt has multiple functions beyond preserving objects from decay. It penetrates things, flavours their taste, and spreads steadily. It is unique and irrepressible, making it a valuable tool in various applications.

Brown suggests that we can also learn about this metaphor by looking at the Old Testament,

A lot of metaphorical connections can be drawn from the image of salt. The Old Testament expressions “the salt of the covenant” (Lev 2:13) and “covenant of salt” (Num 18:19; 2 Chron 13:5) reflect this relationship, with the metaphor of salt presumably emphasising the covenant’s durability. The Scriptures call Israel “a light for the Gentiles” (Isa 49:6; 60:1–3; cf. 9:2). Salt and light are two images of covenant identity and mission that now define Jesus’ disciples.<sup>15</sup>

As God selected Israel to bless all nations, the church is his special community in the New Testament that will persuade society to enter his kingdom. Plantinga states, “The Old Testament people of God were set apart to be a blessing to the nations. The church of Christ has been set apart to pursue the same mission. Sainthood is for serving the world in the name of Jesus Christ.”<sup>16</sup>

According to Ferguson, Jesus may have had in mind the use of salt in the Old Testament, like in Ezekiel 16:4. In this passage, salt was used for hygiene by rubbing a

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<sup>11</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (London: SCM Press, 2015), 130.

<sup>12</sup> Zondervan Interactive (Firm), ed., *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, computer file (Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan Interactive, 1998), 138.

<sup>13</sup> Michael Oyebowale Oyetade, “Salt and light in Matthew 5:13-14: A Paradigm for Democratic Sustainability in Nigeria,” *Pennsylvania*, 2021, 2.

<sup>14</sup> Oyetade, 2.

<sup>15</sup> Jeannine K. Brown, *Matthew*, Illustrated edition (Michigan: Baker Books, 2015), 55.

<sup>16</sup> Cornelius Plantinga, *Beyond Doubt: Faith-Building Devotions on Questions Christians Ask* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2002), 267.



newborn. He concludes that disciples should make a moral impact by living in holiness. Furthermore, in Leviticus 2:13, sacrifices were accompanied by salt, described as “the salt of the covenant” that symbolised faithfulness. A true disciple is faithful to Jesus and other people. Just as salt is used to season food, believers should bring positive differences in their contexts.

Even though it is difficult to determine which aspect of the metaphor Jesus referred to, it is generally accepted that salt was essential for life in ancient culture, and thus the disciples were crucial in enhancing community flavour, preserving the earth from corruption, and making it a pleasant place to live. By implication, “the church, which is not different from the world, becomes both pointless and powerless.”<sup>17</sup>

The purpose of the existence of salt is to be useful in τῆς γῆς (the earth). The earth signifies “the world or a place characterised by weaknesses.”<sup>18</sup> It refers to “the inhabited globe and means the inhabitants of the earth, all people living on the earth, all mankind, all humanity, all people everywhere or in summary, the world of men.”<sup>19</sup> Jesus confirmed that disciples would receive power from the Holy Spirit and be witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the end of the earth (Acts 1:8). They are expected to influence and impact people wherever they are found, helping them live according to God’s will.

### **The Tasteless Salt (Matt 5:13bc)**

The phrase ἐὰν δὲ τὸ ἅλας μωρανθῆ (But if the salt has lost its taste) is a third-class condition with a subjunctive introduced by ἐὰν, which treats the premise as not certain but very probable. It expresses a situation that people cannot imagine because of the nature of the salt. In addition, “This is a statement of the impossible, as with the camel passing through the eye of a needle in Mathew 19:24. Normally, salt does not lose its saltiness, but the possibility is entertained here to emphasise that disciples must maintain a lifestyle radically distinct from the world.”<sup>20</sup> Because disciples share the nature of Christ, they live a life that glorifies God. If they stop following Christ, that will prove they were not genuine disciples. It is hard to

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<sup>17</sup> Sinclair B. Ferguson, *The Sermon on the Mount: Kingdom Life in a Fallen World* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1987), 61.

<sup>18</sup> W. E. Vine, *Vine’s Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*, 3rd edition (Nashville, Tenn: Thomas Nelson, 1996), 191.

<sup>19</sup> Tehan and Abernathy, *An Exegetical Summary of The Sermon on the Mount, Second Edition*, 29.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.



imagine that a true disciple of Christ loses his divine nature or stops pursuing the standards of the kingdom of God.

Ellison states, “This is usually explained by the salt being the outside layer of rock salt, where the salinity has been lost by the action of the sun and rain, or that it had been adulterated. Neither really suits the context. Rather the physically impossible shows that the disciple without a salty effect has never been a true one.”<sup>21</sup> Therefore, a local church should not lose its taste in the community where it is ministering.

Furthermore, concerning ἐν τίνι ἀλισθήσεται; (How shall its saltiness be restored?). Fausset and Brown suggest, “The question is not if Christians lose their grace which makes them a blessing to their fellow men? But, since living Christianity is the only ‘salt of the earth,’ if men lose that, what else can supply its place?”<sup>22</sup> Stott rightly says, “Christian saltiness is the character, committed discipleship, and beatitudes. Effectiveness depends on retraining Christlikeness, as distinct Christians maintain their influence in society.”<sup>23</sup> Instead of blaming society because of the decay in moral values, local churches should examine if they are effective in their mission as expected by Jesus Christ. As Stott points out, “When any community deteriorates, the blame should be attached where it belongs: not to the community which is going bad but the church which is failing in its responsibility as salt to stop it going bad.”<sup>24</sup> The local church should uphold God’s standards in community conduct, resulting in a powerful impact. Keener suggests that a disciple who rejects beatitudes’ values is like tasteless salt, lacking value. Genuine commitment from a professed disciple is essential for the kingdom’s work.<sup>25</sup>

### **The Metaphor of Light (Matt 5:14a)**

Emphatically, Jesus instructs Ὑμεῖς ἐστε τὸ φῶς τοῦ κόσμου. (You are the light of the world). The light metaphor is parallel to the salt imagery in verse 13. The use of this present tense (ἐστε) is descriptive. Disciples are light; they do not just have light but are. They will not

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<sup>21</sup> Howley, ed., *The Bible Commentary for Today: Based* (London: Pickering and Inglis, 1979), 1190.

<sup>22</sup> D. D. Rev Robert Jamieson, A. M. Rev A. R. Fausset, and D. D. Rev David Brown, *Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Michigan: Zondervan, 1977), 898-99.

<sup>23</sup> John R. W. Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7): Christian Counter-Culture*, Text, *The Bible Speaks Today*; 40B (Leicester [Leicestershire]: Inter-varsity Press, 1978), 60.

<sup>24</sup> Bruce Nicholls, *In Word and Deed: Evangelism and Social Responsibility* (GR, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1986), 230.

<sup>25</sup> Craig S. Keener, *Matthew*, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series 1 (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 109.



become; they are. There is no doubt about their identity. They are light since they have decided to follow Jesus and to walk in his teachings.

Adeyemo comments that “this image was certainly familiar to the disciples since the nation of Israel and its capital Jerusalem were considered ‘the light of the nations’ (Isa 42:6). The notion of secret discipleship is not biblical. Disciples are called to illuminate the world through their witness to God, the source of light.”<sup>26</sup> The image of light is also used in Isaiah 49:6; 60:1-3) and highlights both identity (You are the light) and mission (let your light shine before people or humanity).<sup>27</sup> It is noted that,

Even Jews considered themselves as the light of the world (Rom 2:19); however, the genuine light is the Suffering Servant (Isa 42:6; 49:6), which is fulfilled in Jesus (Matt 4:16; cf. John 8:12; 9:5; 12:35; 1 John 1:7). The new light is derived from his disciples (cf. Eph 5:8-9; Phil 2:15). This is the second of two descriptions of his disciples. A parallel description can be found in John 8:12 when Jesus Christ identifies himself as the light of the world.<sup>28</sup>

The phrase τοῦ κόσμου (of the world) is not just the geographical area but also the system in which people live. Jesus’ mission as the light of the world is to help people see the need for salvation. Disciples, who follow Jesus, are called to shine in various sectors like politics and education, bringing the goodness of God to people and encouraging them to walk in the light,

Jesus emphasises the challenge given so plainly in his Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20) in the Sermon on the Mount: the entire world is to be our area of influence. To reduce it to anything less would be to limit the Lord Jesus Christ’s power, authority, and mercy. He has said that the entire world will be the sphere in which the gospel will be proclaimed and carried out. All men must hear and see it.<sup>29</sup>

Therefore, disciples who gather in the local church constitute the light of that community. Since Jesus is the light of the world, bringing people out of darkness and into his marvellous light, “we must expose moral darkness and shine our own light on it.”<sup>30</sup> The community of disciples (the local church), the world’s light, has to apply and combine these two realities: to love the world and not love it! Ed Stetzer highlights that the “church cannot be the church if it is unwilling to be the church among the people to whom God has sent us because its goal is

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<sup>26</sup> Collectif, *Commentaire Biblique contemporain: Un commentaire écrit... par 70 théologiens africains*, Farel edition (Marne-la-Vallée: Farel, 2008), 1205.

<sup>27</sup> Jeannine K. Brown, *Matthew*, Illustrated edition (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2015), 55.

<sup>28</sup> Zondervan Interactive (Firm), *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, 139-40.

<sup>29</sup> Ferguson, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 65-66.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.



not to get away from the world. Holiness is separation from sin but not separation from sinners.”<sup>31</sup> One of the problems that some people have is the comprehension of the church’s doctrine (Ecclesiology). Devenish comments, “Ecclesiology often emphasises the church as a people called out from the world, but this is only part of the truth. God’s purpose is to send us with a mission, and the essence of the church is missional. We belong to a mission agency, which is why the church exists in the world.”<sup>32</sup> Ed Stetzer summarises this statement: “God’s mission and Kingdom direct the church’s divinely ordained mission, and the missional nature of the church propels and guides God’s people to fulfil their mission.”<sup>33</sup>

### **The Parable of a City on a Hill and a Lamp on the Lampstand (Matt 5:14b-15)**

The disciples of Jesus are also portrayed as a city set on a hill that cannot be hidden. It could have referred to Jerusalem or any other elevated city in the New Testament times.<sup>34</sup> It has been observed that “Lampstands from the Roman period have been found that range from two to five feet in height, allowing light from a small oil lamp to shine throughout a room.”<sup>35</sup> Thus this imagery was common to Jesus’ audience.

It is evident from this image that disciples fearing visibility are not genuine disciples. The church must be visible and fulfil Jesus’ desire, even under persecution or danger. It must be available to show the godly way. Keener insists that “A disciple should be as obvious as a city set on a hill (as most cities were), and a light in a home should be no easier to hide than a torchlit city at night (5:14-15; most homes had only one room).”<sup>36</sup> Bonnard explains that “as such cities could not be hidden, so also it is unthinkable to light a lamp and hide it under a peck-measure (“bowl,” v.15, NIV).”<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Craig Ott, *The Mission of the Church: Five Views in Conversation* (Ada, Michigan: Baker, 2016), 114.

<sup>32</sup> David Devenish, *What on Earth Is the Church For? A Blueprint for the Future for Church Based Mission and Social Action* (New York City: Authentic, 2005), 20-21.

<sup>33</sup> Ott, *The Mission of the Church*, 91.

<sup>34</sup> Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (InterVarsity Press, 2014), 56.

<sup>35</sup> Brown, *Matthew*, 2015, 56.

<sup>36</sup> Keener, *Matthew*, 109.

<sup>37</sup> Zondervan Interactive (Firm), *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, 139-40.





### **The Good Works of Disciples (v. 16)**

In verse 16, light and good deeds are intertwined. According to Betz, good deeds are the shining of the light. The Sermon on the Mount explicitly includes the virtues stated in the beatitudes (vv 3-12) and everything in 5:17-7:12.<sup>38</sup>

Disciples are commanded to shine their light for the world to see their good deeds and to give glory to their Father in heaven. For social involvement, James, the leader of the early church in Jerusalem, emphasises that believers must genuinely engage in social activities to glorify God, demonstrating faith through actions and good deeds (James 2:14-22). Also, apostle Peter counsels believers: “Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honourable so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation” (1 Pet 2:12, ESV). Good works refer to disciples’ holiness for the glory of God because others will be drawn to glorify God through their witness.<sup>39</sup> To do and to see the good works should be motivated by giving glory to God. Therefore, the purpose of shining is so that people may see the good works and glorify God. Jesus’ good works are not specific, possibly focusing on the quality of life and not just fighting corruption and injustice. In addition to that, Stott argues that even “evangelism must be counted as one of the ‘good works’ by which our light shines, and our Father is glorified.”<sup>40</sup> It is agreeable, as Tehan stated, “Verses 3-16 look both back and forward: they continue describing qualifications of those entering the kingdom and introduce the duties of those in the kingdom.”<sup>41</sup>

### **The Great Commission (Matt 28:19-20)**

The Great Commission also defines the mandate Christians are given in the world. In Matthew 28:19, the verse begins with the conjunction οὖν (therefore), an inferential conjunction that summarises the preceding discussion.<sup>42</sup> The author concludes Jesus’s precedent declaration in Matthew 28:18 πᾶσα ἐξουσία ἐν οὐρανῷ καὶ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς (All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me). Since all the authority ἐδόθη (has been given) to Jesus by the Father, he then commissions his disciples. The aorist participle

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<sup>38</sup> Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 163-64.

<sup>39</sup> Sinclair B. Ferguson, *Sermon on the Mount*, 1<sup>st</sup> Ed. Edition (Edinburgh; Carlisle, USA: Banner of Truth, 1988), 65.

<sup>40</sup> John R W. Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount J* (Illinois, USA: Inter-Varsity Press, 1985), 61.

<sup>41</sup> Tehan and Abernathy, 29.

<sup>42</sup> Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Michigan: Zondervan, 1996), 673.



πορευθέντες (going) is antecedent to the main verb (μαθητεύσατε, make disciples). The mandate “go” is secondary to the main thrust (make disciples), though in many cases essential to reaching a specific people group.<sup>43</sup> Disciples are supposed to go into the world for a divine mission.

The focus and the command is on making disciples with the subordinate participles βαπτίζοντες (Baptising, v. 19) and διδάσκοντες, teaching, v. 20), describing what should happen as they go. This standard was to apply to all people in every country and every century.<sup>44</sup> Graig Blomberg summarises,

The main command of Christ’s commission is “make disciples” (μαθητεύσατε). To “make disciples of all nations” does require many people to leave their homelands, but Jesus’ main focus remains on the task of all believers to duplicate themselves wherever they may be. The verb “make disciples” also commands a kind of evangelism that does not stop after someone makes a profession of faith. The truly subordinate participles in v. 19 explain what making disciples involves: “baptising” them and “training” them in obedience to all of Jesus’s commandments. The first of these will be a once-for-all, decisive initiation into Christian Community. The second proves a perennially incomplete, life-long task.<sup>45</sup>

Thus, “the church, in its ministry, is carrying out God’s will that all creation should know his once-secret plan: that all people in this life should be freed and should come to mature fellowship in union with God, and that in eternity they should share his glory (Col 1:27). This is the goal of God’s action, in Christ and the ministry and mission of the church.”<sup>46</sup> The disciples were required to teach people everything Jesus had commanded, including the contents of the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5:1–16). Fernando aptly puts it,

The preferred term here—rather than evangelism—would be discipling, or making disciples, which signifies the process not only of bringing people to faith but of fostering their spiritual growth in terms of relationship with God and his people, and of obedience in all areas of life: “teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matt 28:19).<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Winston Crawley, *Global Mission: A Story to Tell: An Interpretation of Southern Baptist Foreign Missions* (USA: Broadman Press, 1985), 79.

<sup>44</sup> Watson David C., *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Cambridge: University Printing Services, n.d.), 88.

<sup>45</sup> Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew*, The New American Commentary Vol.22 22 (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman Press, 1992), 431.

<sup>46</sup> Alfred C. Krass, *Applied Theology 1: “Go...and Make Disciples,”* TEF Study Guide 9 (United Kingdom: SPCK London, 1974), 6.

<sup>47</sup> Keith Ferdinando, “Mission: A Problem of Definition,” The Gospel Coalition, 54, accessed April 1, 2023, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/mission-a-problem-of-definition/>.



Therefore the core mandate of the Great Commission is disciple every people group for Jesus.<sup>48</sup>

## Church's Involvement in Social Justice

The biblical understanding of justice stems from the character of God; “Biblical justice has always had a social, political, and economic dimension to it. By virtue of their relationship with a God who has revealed himself as righteous and holy, the people of God have a heritage of responsibility to each other and the world around them.”<sup>49</sup> Doing justice is more than just stopping injustice; it implies fairness, decency, and honesty.<sup>50</sup> Moltmann believes that the answer to the question about the church's involvement in social justice will force the church to “sharpen and readjust its eschatological focus.”<sup>51</sup>

In DRC, the rights of the poor and underprivileged groups are often not upheld. They are marginalised, misused, pushed behind, and forgotten. Thus this is an area where Christians can be equipped to shine their light. It can make a lot of difference since Christians (Roman Catholics, Protestants) comprise over 80% of the population in Congo.<sup>52</sup>

According to the 2021 Report on International Religious Freedom of Christians, an estimated 48.1 per cent are Protestant, including evangelical Christians and the Church of Jesus Christ on Earth through the Prophet Simon Kimbangu (Kimbanguist), and 47.3 per cent are Roman Catholic. Other Christian groups include Jehovah's Witnesses, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and the Greek Orthodox Church.<sup>53</sup> From 80% (in 2005) to 95.4% (in 2021), the numerical impact should translate into transformed social life for Congolese. Although some churches already have schools, hospitals and other social and economic services, there is a need to do more alongside the gospel proclamation.

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<sup>48</sup> Crawley, *Global Mission*, 79.

<sup>49</sup> Walter A. Elwell, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2nd edition (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Carlisle, Cumbria, UK: Baker Academic, 2001), 642.

<sup>50</sup> Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert, *What Is the Mission of the Church?: Making Sense of Social Justice, Shalom, and the Great Commission* (Crossway, 2011), 161.

<sup>51</sup> Elwell, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 643.

<sup>52</sup> Whetho Ayo, “Religion and Conflict Transformation in the Democratic Republic of Congo, 1999-2004.,” 2006, 21, <https://core.ac.uk/reader/322918190>.

<sup>53</sup> “Religion in the Democratic Republic of the Congo,” in *Wikipedia*, July 15, 2023, 1, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Religion\\_in\\_the\\_Democratic\\_Republic\\_of\\_the\\_Congo&oldid=1165478566#cite\\_note-3](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Religion_in_the_Democratic_Republic_of_the_Congo&oldid=1165478566#cite_note-3).



Some local churches in DRC argue that local churches should prioritise social justice, as Jesus came for the poor.<sup>54</sup> This view emphasises the church's mission to promote community well-being, as silence during suffering does not demonstrate love. Reimer writes, "Throughout church history, churches and Christians have been known for their ministries of serving the needy and the poor, and those who have followed Christ have been engaged in shaping humane societies."<sup>55</sup> The same has been emphasised by Tim Chester when he comments on Luke 14:21, "The banquet master invites the poor, crippled, blind, and lame to God's eternal messianic banquet, urging us to reflect God's grace and prioritise the poor and needy over rich neighbors."<sup>56</sup>

The church's involvement in every sphere of society is essential because that is how the church can positively influence the corrupt and unjust system. Commenting on Matthew 5:13-16, Kunhiyop insists, "Without Christian involvement in politics and government, Christians cannot influence society. God can, and often does, but godly men and women in specific political situations to effect changes. Therefore, Jesus Christ commands his followers to be salt and light in the World (Matt 5: 13-16)."<sup>57</sup> Promoting justice is a central theme in the Bible. Apostle Peter reminds believers to be "zealous for what is good" (1 Pet 3:17), and Paul instructs believers to "do good" (Gal 6:10; 1 Thess 5:15; 2 Thess. 3:13; 1 Tim 6:18). These are calls to the people of God to engage their surrounding culture, and living their Christian identity.<sup>58</sup> Kunhiyop advises, "The church serves society by exemplifying God's will, rooted in its community, and actively participating in the world. A church disconnected from society is ineffective and potentially perishable."<sup>59</sup>

As Georges Atido cites African traditions as laying the foundation that Christians in Congo can build on, "church members are urged to help one another in all areas of need, to

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<sup>54</sup> "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the Captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." (Luke 4:18-19, ESV); "... There was not a needy person among them..."(Acts 4: 32-34, ESV); "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world." (James 1: 27, ESV); "But someone will say, 'You have faith and I have works.' Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works."( James 2: 18, ESV).

<sup>55</sup> Johannes Reimer, *Family in Mission: Theology and Praxis* (Langham Global Library, 2020), 165.

<sup>56</sup> Tim Chester and Steve Timmis, *Total Church: A Radical Reshaping Around Gospel and Community* (InterVarsity Press, 2007), 71.

<sup>57</sup> Kunhiyop, *African Christian Theology*, 100.

<sup>58</sup> DeYoung and Gilbert, *What Is the Mission of the Church?* 203.

<sup>59</sup> Samuel Waje Kunhiyop, *African Christian Ethics* (Zondervan Academic, 2019), 105.



the extent done traditionally in African clans. Mutual assistance to church members includes financial contributions to help pay hospital bills, school fees, travelling costs, wedding arrangements, and the expenses of hospitality and bereavement.”<sup>60</sup> Unfortunately, even though church members are encouraged to look for the good of the community, most Christians are individualistic in the sense that everyone is looking for his comfort. Therefore, the root of the problem is most probably at an individual level. If every Christian decides to live like Christ, individually, the impact will be visible at the local and eventually at a national level. I concur with Lanza del Vasto that:

We cannot have peace in the world if we do not have it in our nation, and we cannot have peace in our nation if we do not have it in our communities, and we will not have peace in our community if we do not have it in our family, and we will not have peace in our family if we do not have it within ourselves.<sup>61</sup>

Christians and the church should not be silent when injustice is rampant. The situation in DRC results from what Elie Wiesel summarises: “The greatest evil today is indifference. Because to know and not to act is a way of consenting to injustice.”<sup>62</sup>

Harnack indicates that the apostolic church laid an example for us:

The mission and expansion of the early church was through Christians’ involvement with the poor, orphans, widows, the sick, mine-workers, prisoners, slaves, and travellers. The new language on the lips of Christians was the language of love. But it was more than a language; it was a thing of power and action. This was a social gospel, a gospel of love and charity in the very best sense of the word and was practised not as a stratagem to lure outsiders to the church but simply as a natural expression of faith in Christ.<sup>63</sup>

Thus, the church in DRC can be salt and light in a context marred by corruption, poverty, and injustice. Church leaders must speak against such vices and promote godly virtues.

### **Church’s Involvement in Evangelism**

According to the Lausanne covenant, “Evangelism is the proclamation of the historical, biblical Christ as Saviour and Lord, with a view of persuading people to come to him

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<sup>60</sup> George Pirwoth Atido, “Church Revitalization in Congo: Missiological Insights from One Church’s Efforts at Glocalization,” *International Bulletin of Mission Research* 41, no. 4 (October 1, 2017): 7, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2396939317730502>.

<sup>61</sup> Michael Green, *Evangelism Through the Local Church*, First Edition (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1992), 555.

<sup>62</sup> Green, 555.

<sup>63</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 49.



personally and be reconciled to God.”<sup>64</sup> Some church leaders in DRC have embraced evangelism as the church’s principal mission. In these churches, the focus consists of winning souls with an eschatological perspective. They put priority on eternal life. Hence, according to them, the church’s mission should be the gospel’s proclamation because the fight for social justice is temporary. Bishop Dag Mills corroborated that we must win the lost at any cost because “the gospel must first be published among all nations (Mark 13:10).”<sup>65</sup> He emphasised that every church member must be involved in evangelism without exception,

Pastors should mobilise the entire church to pray for church growth, salvation, and people becoming born-again. They should lead the sheep into outreaches and soul-winning activities, such as crusades, breakfast meetings, and concerts. This approach leads to better church growth and less discontentment.<sup>66</sup>

Churches that support this view believe that only the local churches can primarily help people be reconciled with God. However, many non-governmental organisations in DRC help people in need or fight for justice.

Michael Lawrence’s statement is helpful as he explained that: “The Church’s mission is not to renew culture but to redeem souls, fighting against spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. It provides life and living water to both the rich and poor, ensuring they never hunger or thirst again (John 4:6).”<sup>67</sup> He continues his statement by discouraging the local church from budgeting for social activities like helping the poor. He says, “The Gospel proclamation is the primary mission of the local Church, not requiring financial commitment to alleviate poverty.”<sup>68</sup> Therefore, Lawrence’s view consists of focusing only on evangelism and leaving social issues to other organisations in the community.

DRC faces challenges in respecting human dignity, corruption, and powerlessness. Church leaders prioritise reconciling lost people to God, recognising sin as the root of world problems and Jesus Christ as the only solution. They believe the church is an instrument for eternal glory. Lawrence specified, “Being missional is a way of thinking about the church and how it relates to the world. A missional church understands that the church does not go on

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<sup>64</sup> Elwell, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 410.

<sup>65</sup> Dag Heward-Mills, *Evangelism and Missions* (Fairfax, VA: Xulon Press, 2011), 33.

<sup>66</sup> Heward-Mills, 46-47.

<sup>67</sup> Michael Lawrence, *Biblical Theology in the Life of the Church: A Guide for Ministry* (Crossway, 2010), 211-12.

<sup>68</sup> Lawrence, 210.



missions or send people out to do missions. Rather the church is the Mission of God into the world, to heal the world and reconcile people to God.”<sup>69</sup>

The world’s main problem is sin. That is why the church should focus on spiritual rather than social problems. This view also holds that Jesus came to the world mainly to save the lost, not just abolish injustice. Billy Graham rightly stated that the proclamation of the gospel can bring solutions to other human problems, “if the church returned to her primary mission of proclaiming the gospel and converting people to Christ, it would have a far bigger impact on men’s social, moral, and psychological needs than anything else it could ever achieve. Some of history’s most significant social movements have resulted from men’s conversion to Christ.”<sup>70</sup> Likewise, the church’s role in reconciling the world through Jesus Christ means that “our primary commitment is not to any particular form of Christian community, but rather to the interaction and relationship between the gospel and the cultural contexts in which we find ourselves.”<sup>71</sup>

## Conclusion

The study looked at differing opinions on the role of the church in the world. Some hold that the church should solely concentrate on the salvation of souls. In contrast, others believe that apart from spiritual liberation, the church should fight against social evils in society and advocate for justice. The two scriptures examined (Matt 5:13–16; 28:19–20) affirm that the church has a role to make disciples and serve as the salt of the earth and light of the world. It is essential to prioritise the proclamation of the gospel (making disciples) because it addresses the core human problem of sin. However, evangelism is not the only mandate of the church. The church’s mandate is to be salt and light within its context. The church should build up believers who can be salt and light in the world. The local church can tremendously impact lives in various areas through the lives of disciples who are transformed by God’s word. The local church is the ultimate disciple-making approach. Therefore, the most important “social activity” a local church can conduct is making disciples. That is the church’s primary and absolute mission in the world.

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<sup>69</sup> Lawrence, 205.

<sup>70</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 345.

<sup>71</sup> Zondervan et al., *Four Views on the Church’s Mission*, ed. Jason S. Sexton (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2017), 148.



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