

An interview with Shane Claiborne

Shane Claiborne is a best-selling author, prominent Christian activist, sought-after speaker and a recovering sinner. He has worked alongside Mother Teresa, spent three weeks in Baghdad with the Iraq peace team and is also a founding member of The Simple Way, a faith community in inner-city Philadelphia.

Shane writes and travels extensively, speaking about peacemaking, social justice and Jesus. His work has featured on everything from Fox News, the Wall Street Journal to CNN.

Here he talks to Bible Society about how he came to be involved in the fight for social justice and his vision for a new Christian world.

Tell us a little bit about your life and how you got involved in peace-making and social justice?

I'm a Tennessee boy. I was raised a Methodist and went to college in Philadelphia. It was while I was studying sociology and reading a load of books that I felt that social justice and peace-making chose me.

They suddenly came to life when a group of homeless families were living in an abandoned cathedral and the Catholic Church actually sent them an eviction notice. This sparked a huge movement of students, neighbours and others. We read about it in newspapers and it was one of those situations where we threw our hands up at god and said, 'God why don't you do something?' and God looked back at us and said, 'I did do something – I made you'.

So we got involved, the families got housing, and everything else has really bubbled out of that.

Where did the *Simple Way* community start and how has it changed?

A few years after the St Edward's Cathedral struggle, a group of us had become inspired by the vision in the Book of Acts and the early church about sharing everything together. So we moved into the neighbourhood and started The Simple Way. Originally we all piled into one house, now ten years later we have a bunch of houses and it's a little bit more of a village.

The questions we are asking now are also a little bit different. We still share food but you begin to ask, why are people hungry and where are the jobs? So we're not just trying to look at the symptoms, we're also trying to look at the disease, the systemic issues of the neighbourhood and all the spiritual stuff to do with that. The inner city is our contemporary desert and we go there to practise resurrection and to love our neighbours.

How did you end up working with Mother Teresa?

Mother Teresa was really important because we really needed to learn from someone and she seemed like a good bet at the time. So we wrote her a letter and ended up in Calcutta just trying to see what it looked like to love that radically and to live for Jesus.

What is the biblical mandate for the church being involved in issues such as protecting the environment, keeping the peace and helping the poor?

Almost every time Jesus opens his mouth he talks about the kingdom of God and we are to seek first the kingdom of God. I grew up with this idea that it meant going to heaven after you die, but, the more you look at it, Jesus was talking about the kingdom coming on earth and I'm convinced that Jesus didn't just come to prepare us to die but to teach us how to live.

So what does it mean to imagine our world, our neighbourhood to look like God's dream for it? All the nations are going to be before God and we're going to get asked some questions about 'When I was in prison did you visit me?', 'When I was a stranger did you welcome me?'

So this is where it comes from. Our faith works its way out in compassion, love and justice for those most vulnerable and hurting in the world.

What spiritual practices help keep your heart and mind alive to God?

The work of spiritual formation is so important because what has become the heart of unhealthy evangelicalism is that we have become obsessed with making believers. Evangelism has come at a cost to discipleship. So we have Christianity that is a mile long and an inch deep.

We're sent into the world, not to make believers but to make disciples. We do a lot of biblical study here in Philadelphia and a lot of prayer. We do retreats and we have mentors and spiritual directors that walk with us and are perhaps a few steps ahead of us on the journey. We all need someone we are accountable to and leading us along the path. All the traditional Christian practices and disciplines such as fasting and solitude and Sabbath are a big part of my life and our life (as a community).

They don't always come naturally. I was describing it to someone as like exercising or going jogging. You get up sometimes and you're not really feeling like it and at first you force yourself to do it, but sometime later you feel like you are breathing better now.

Discipline and disciple come from the same word. One of the dangers I think, is that we lose our sense of discipline because we overreact to the legalistic Christianity that's left a bad taste in our mouth. If we are not careful, we end up starting communities that have a sloppy spirituality.

How do you keep going when many feel overwhelmed by the brokenness and pain of the world?

We're following Jesus and so we're not promised that life will be easy, just look at what happened to him. I think Mother Teresa said it when she said to follow Jesus is simple but not easy.

What I get jazzed about is that there is a whole generation of people who are saying they are not sure that the patterns of this world are what God wants them to be and they are not sure that the way we are living makes sense. I think it's an opportunity for Jesus' vision for the kingdom of god to shine.

Maybe we need to rethink our economics, how we are treating creation and where we are to locate our lives. Rather than running away from suffering, maybe we are to move closer to it like what Jesus did.

So I get excited about that. I do a lot to take care of myself, to sustain myself. We have a very disciplined payer life and I have a Sabbath every week where I rest. I also take some retreats and things like that.

Community is a big part of it too. We're not called to be radical lone rangers, but we are carrying the weight and burdens of injustice with one another and with Jesus. So many hands make that a little lighter and many shoulders carry that a little better.

Can you expand on the quote – 'the greatest tragedy of the church is not that rich Christians don't care about the poor, it is that they don't know the poor'?

This is one of the things I have come to realise. My journey has taken me to a lot of different places from Calcutta to Willow Creek Community Church, in Chicago, a pioneer in the mega-church. One of the things I realised was that I was meeting some of the most genuine people on the planet that loved Jesus and were trying to live faithfully in this world. I came to realise in a lot of places that the tragedy is not that folks don't care but that they just don't know the poor. That wall of insulation is part of what allows some of the patterns we see to perpetuate.

We don't know who makes our clothes, who grows our coffee or who is sleeping on the streets in our neighbourhood. If we don't see that then it doesn't keep us up at night. That's the tragedy, the insulation. Because I really believe we have a conscience, if the Spirit is within us and doesn't allow us to rest well when we see the pain and suffering of others.

I saw the BBC programme where people who love to cook were taken to where the food comes from. So they took them to the Philippines to work in the tuna plant and out on the shrimping boats and they were just devastated. That humanising of it is exactly what we've got to do because God cares about that, he cares about how people are treated.

And Jesus told that great story of the rich man and Lazarus, where the rich man creates a wall, a gated neighbourhood, but came to find out that the wall wasn't just separating him from the beggars outside his gate but from God. Not only had he locked people out but he had locked himself in. and that's the flipside of this. It is actually robbing us of life because we are made for compassion, we are made to love so when we become so self-absorbed we end up miserable.

Can we be well-off and Christian or should we all face the challenge of Jesus and sell all we have?

That's a great question. Some people sell everything, some people like Zaccheus sell half of everything, but I think we are all called on not to conform to the patterns of this world that are out-of-sync with God's kingdom. When we see the richest 20 per cent in the world having 90 per cent of the world's resources, that's a pattern we have to interrupt and there's a lot of ways to interrupt that pattern.

Non-conformity doesn't mean uniformity, we won't all end up doing the same thing.

Another friend of mine was asked if it was a sin to be rich. He said, 'It's not necessarily a sin to get rich because sometimes you stumble into that, but it's always a sin to die rich.' I also think of folks like John Wesley who said, 'When money makes its way into my hands I get it out as quick as I can, lest it make its way into my heart.' So he capped his income off at the poverty rate.

That's an inspiration to us and a challenge to us, not just how much we give but how much we have left in light of the fact that we have sisters and brothers who are starving.

We are being freed up. We don't share because we have to, we share because we want to and we realise the gifts of God are too good to keep for ourselves. We want other people to experience them.

That's where Mother Teresa had joy. She had a hard life but she also had joy. I remember one reporter saying to her, 'you are such a hero, I couldn't do what you do if you paid me a million dollars.' and she said, 'Me neither. But I would do it for the love of God and I do it because it's what I am made for.'

So how can we move beyond our guilt and charity fatigue to show practical love and compassion to people in our community?

I think we start really small and don't get overwhelmed with the hugeness of it. When Mother Teresa was asked how she had taken 50,000 people off the streets of Calcutta, she replied, 'I started with one.'

She also said, 'We can do no great things, but only small things with great love.' So what's important is not how much we do but how much love we put into doing it.

If every Christian home had a room for a stranger, we would change poverty and homelessness in the world.

If every Christian family would welcome someone coming out of prison and try to transition them back into society...

If we would adopt a kid, or foster care, or take care of a kid that is orphaned...

You know there are so many places to start and when you start you realise, not only is it giving life to someone else, but it's giving life to us. That's the real secret. People that live this kind of life are the most content, the most beautiful folks I've ever met.

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