

B. SHOULD BELIEVERS ATTEMPT TO PREVENT OR ALLEVIATE SUFFERING?

1. Do believers have any obligation to attempt to prevent or alleviate suffering in a sinful world?

- a. The theoretical question: Should we as believers attempt to do in the present that which God says He is going to do in the future?

That is, God says that when Christ comes in His glory He is going to do away with poverty and famine and war and violence and disease and sickness and pain and sorrow and death. If God is going to do these things, then should we attempt them? If we do attempt them, will we not seem to be fighting against God and His Plan? And can or will any such attempts accomplish anything?

Here we must make a distinction between the Plan of God and the Law of God (the will of God addressed to man's obedience in any dispensation). Although the Lord has included all sorts of good and evil in His Plan, His Plan is not the rule of our obedience. The rule of our obedience is His Law.

To illustrate this distinction between the Plan of God and the Law of God, let us consider the presence of poverty on the earth. In Matthew 26:11 Jesus tells His disciples, "The poor you will always have with you." Some believers have interpreted this to mean that any attempts to alleviate or eliminate poverty are contrary to God's will. And yet in Matthew 19:21 Jesus tells a rich young man, "Go, sell your possessions and give to the poor." What if all rich people did this? And in Galatians 2:10, James, Peter, and John asked Paul to continue to remember the poor, which Paul was eager to do. What if all believers were eager to do this?

The solution to this seeming contradiction is the distinction between God's Plan and God's Law. Hypothetically it could be argued that if all wealth were redistributed, poverty would be completely eliminated, and then Jesus' words would turn out to be false! But Jesus did not say that we should always have the poor with us, but rather that we would always have the poor with us! This illustrates the distinction between the realm of being and the realm of obligation, between description and prescription.

Jesus knew that poverty would not be eliminated until He would return; and then every man would own his own property and sit under his own vine and under his own fig. But this prediction did not tell human beings what they ought to do; the Law of God told them that. The Law of God told the rich young man to love God supremely (not his wealth), and to love his neighbor as himself. In order to be able to serve one master – God – the rich young man would need to give away his wealth; and in order to love his