



The Church Is More Than A Charity

Humanitarian work matters, but worship is what sustains the conviction, discipline, and devotion that keep it alive.

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HUMANITARIAN WORK

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Forgive the provocative title. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints certainly should care for the poor and needy as modeled by the head of the Church, Jesus Christ Himself.

There is, however, a consistent thread of criticism whenever the cost of a Church-involved project becomes public, that all of that cost should have been spent helping the poor instead.

The argument has even been extended to time, with critics arguing that spending time in worship is a waste when it could be spent in soup kitchens.

I disagree. Worship is not an alternative to doing good. It's the engine that makes doing good last.

And this isn't a new argument. A home crowded with people. A dinner. A sense that Something Big is about to happen. Then a woman—Mary of Bethany, in the telling of the Gospel of [John](#)—breaks open a jar of costly ointment and pours it on the feet of Jesus Christ. The room fills with fragrance. It's extravagantly impractical. It looks, from a certain perspective, like waste.

And right on cue, a voice rises with the sensible objection—*the ethical objection*:

Why wasn't this [sold and given to the poor](#)?

It comes from Judas Iscariot. And if you're honest, the line sounds persuasive. It sounds like moral clarity. It sounds like priorities. It sounds like what an enlightened, modern faith should say.

But Jesus doesn't nod along. He doesn't say, "Great point—let's liquidate the perfume and put together a hunger-relief budget." He defends the act.

Jesus' action should break the false spell that says devotion and discipleship are only real when they are immediately convertible into measurable "impact." It reminds us that worship—direct, reverent, God-facing worship—can look inefficient to anyone who thinks humanitarian deliverables are the only ledger that matters.

And it's not the only time Jesus refuses to reduce the life of faith into a single social program. He commands His followers to [feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the prisoner](#), lift the heavy burden. But He also commands [love of God with heart, mind, and strength](#). He commands prayer. He retreats to commune with the Father. He institutes ordinances. He receives honor. He welcomes adoration.

In other words, worship *and* service both matter enormously. The Christian life is not [either/or](#).

That's the tension underneath a modern criticism that gets aimed—often loudly—at The

Church of Jesus Christ: Why not spend all your time and **money** on humanitarian causes? Why build churches and temples, do worship services, teach doctrine, run youth programs, send missionaries—why do any “religion stuff” when the world is on fire?

Let’s take that critique seriously, because the best versions of it come from a good instinct: people are suffering, and we should not be casual about it. If you believe in Christ, you should feel a holy discomfort when you see hunger, war, displacement, addiction, loneliness, and abuse. If your faith never pulls you outward into sacrifice and service, then it’s not discipleship.

But the critique collapses when it assumes something that sounds compassionate yet ends up being corrosive: Worship is basically overhead, and the “real work” begins only when worship ends.

That assumption is not just spiritually mistaken. It’s historically naïve and psychologically backward. In practice, it’s one of the fastest ways to kill the very humanitarian impulse it claims to maximize.

Worship is the foundation of sustainable humanitarian good.

Not because worship is a loophole to avoid helping people. But because worship is how you *make* a people who keep helping people when it’s hard, when it’s boring, when it’s thankless, when it’s politically inconvenient, when the cameras are gone, when your own life is falling apart, when you’re tempted to turn cynical.

And if—hypothetically—humanitarian aid *were* the ultimate end goal, you would still want a church to stay fiercely centered on its religious mission. Because that mission is what grows the community, strengthens the moral muscles, and keeps the generosity from becoming a short-lived mood.

Even if the only goal was to maximize humanitarian efforts, a religious mission is a wise investment.

If a church becomes just another version of those institutions, it loses its reason to exist.

The Trap of Turning a Church Into an NGO

The world already has many institutions whose job description is “make material life better.”

Some are incredible: disaster responders, hospitals, development orgs, refugee agencies, food systems, governments running safety nets. Many of them do heroic work, and believers should often be their most loyal partners and supporters.

But here’s the uncomfortable truth: if a church becomes just another version of those institutions, it loses its reason to exist.

Not because humanitarian work isn’t holy. It is. But because a church’s unique contribution is not merely *relief*—it is *redemption*. It exists to reconcile people to God, shape souls, bind communities through covenant, preach repentance and hope, administer ordinances, and teach a way of life anchored in the living Christ.

When a church quietly trades that identity for the safer, more broadly applauded identity of “a values-based service club,” it doesn’t become more relevant. It becomes replaceable.

And replaceable institutions tend to shrink.

That isn’t an abstract theory; it’s one of the storylines of modern Western Christianity. Beginning in the mid-20th century, many churches in Europe and North America leaned hard into social and political engagement, sometimes explicitly downplaying doctrine, miracles, and distinctive worship as embarrassments from a pre-modern past. On the far edge, you even had “Death of God” theology in the 1960s, arguing that belief in God had become meaningless in modern life.

At the same time, older currents like the “Social Gospel”—a movement that interpreted the kingdom of God as demanding social reform as well as personal conversion—became newly influential in modern form.

These movements that built on the foundation of faith and religious strength produced real good. Civil rights advances, anti-poverty efforts, humanitarian advocacy, not to

mention the millions of individuals given a hand up—many believers gave their lives to these causes. That deserves sincere admiration.

The sociological details are debated, but the broad fact of mainline decline is not. Pew Research Center has documented [significant declines in mainline Protestant](#) identification and retention in the United States in recent decades. And these losses have been localized in the congregations that went all in on a modern social gospel emphasis. When social action becomes the main product and worship becomes a mild preface, churches tend to lose the very people who would have fueled the action.

A church that abandons worship does not become a better charity. It becomes a worse church and, eventually, a weaker charity too. Because the deepest engines of durable compassion—repentance, gratitude, covenant, awe, accountability, forgiveness, hope, spiritual discipline—are cultivated primarily through worship.

Learning From Our Catholic Friends

It's worth noticing: even traditions that have built enormous global service institutions still insist that worship is primary.

The Church of Jesus Christ has focused most of its humanitarian efforts in assisting other organizations. Two of the most prominent are Catholic Charities and Catholic Relief Services.

In [Sacrosanctum Concilium](#) (the Second Vatican Council's Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy), the Church describes itself as "eager to act and yet intent on contemplation," and explicitly orders "action to contemplation," not the reverse. And it says the liturgy is an "outstanding means" by which the faithful express the mystery of Christ and the nature of the Church.

You don't have to be Catholic to see the wisdom of this approach. Worship is neither a waste nor a reward after the work; it's the source that motivates the work, and connects the work to identity, rather than mere philanthropy.

What Worship Actually Does



People sometimes talk about worship like it's a little more than a cultural habit, a vibe if you will.

But biblically (and in Latter-day Saint practice), worship is much more like alignment.

Worship is what happens when you stop treating yourself as the center of the universe—and deliberately, repeatedly, bodily re-center on God. That sounds “spiritual,” and it is. But it has very practical effects:

- **Worship builds a different kind of person**

Humanitarian service requires more than empathy. Empathy is a spark; it flares and fades. Service that persists needs character: patience, chastity, honesty, restraint, long-suffering, courage, meekness, integrity when you're not being watched.

Worship is where these virtues are named, demanded, practiced, and—over time—formed into muscle memory.

- **Worship builds a different kind of community**

A congregation isn't just a crowd of like-minded individuals. At its best, it's a covenant community with thick relationships. You notice when someone disappears; you show up when a baby is born or a parent dies; you bring soup; you sit through awkward conversations; you forgive; you get forgiven.

That kind of community is a miracle. It's also a logistics machine for mercy.

- **Worship builds time horizons long enough for real good**

Some problems yield to a burst of attention. Most don't.

Addiction. Poverty. Education. Conflict. Cycles of abuse. Trauma. Refugee resettlement. Loneliness. Generational hopelessness.

If your only fuel is outrage, you burn out. If your only fuel is applause, you quit when the applause stops.

Worship [trains](#) people to act from a longer story. It makes sacrifice rational because it places sacrifice inside eternity.

- **Worship protects service from becoming ego**

Humanitarianism can become vanity. Service can become a way to be seen, to feel superior, to justify contempt for others (“I help people; why can’t you?”), to build a brand, to control.

Worship is where the ego gets humbled. Where you remember you’re not the savior. Where you’re reminded that you, too, are poor in spirit and desperately in need of grace.

The Data Says Worship Grows Generosity

The argument is not only theological, but empirical.

In the United States, religious participation—especially regular attendance—has repeatedly shown up as one of the strongest predictors of charitable giving and volunteering.

- [Gallup](#) reports that Christians (and especially those who attend church regularly) are more likely than the nonreligious to say they donated and volunteered in the past year.
- A widely circulated analysis hosted by the [Hoover Institution](#) (drawing on the [Social Capital Community Benchmark Survey](#)) found large gaps between weekly attenders and secular respondents in both donating and volunteering—differences measured in double-digit percentage points.
- The [Generosity Commission](#) summarizes the broader pattern bluntly: declining religious participation is frequently cited as part of the donor-participation decline, and there’s “substantial evidence” that religious Americans are more likely to give and volunteer—including to secular causes, not only religious ones.

Some of these benefits likely come from the fact that believers tend to be part of strong communities. Worship, however, doesn’t just create community; it rehearses a moral story where generosity is expected. It normalizes sacrifice. It turns giving from “extra credit” into “this is what we do.”

And psychologists have tried to probe causation more directly. Experiments have found that subtly priming religious concepts can increase prosocial behavior in [anonymous economic games](#). [Meta-analytic work](#) reviewing many studies finds religious priming shows a reliable positive effect on prosocial measures.

You don't need to overclaim this research to see the headline: religious practice isn't merely "private meaning-making." It measurably shapes how people behave toward others.

Which means the critique "Stop worshipping and start serving" is not only spiritually misguided. It's practically self-defeating. Because the evidence suggests worship is part of what produces servers.

You can say, why do you waste time and money worshipping instead of serving, but in practice those who spend their time and money worshipping are also the ones spending the most time and money serving.

So What About The Church of Jesus Christ Specifically?

Let's talk directly. The Church's religious mission costs money. Meetinghouses, temples, missionary work, youth programs, education, publications, administration, welfare logistics.

Critics sometimes frame this as theft from the poor, as if every dollar spent on worship is a dollar stolen from a hungry child.

That's a powerful emotional frame. It's also simplistic in a way that would get laughed out of any serious discussion of how organizations work.

Low overhead is not proof of effectiveness. Some of the biggest organizations in non-profit accountability went to bat to [combat this myth in 2013](#). It remains [true today](#). And the problems that need to be solved won't be solved by pouring money into them. They require [infrastructure](#), training, and longevity. Looking at just welfare for low-income countries, between 2020 and 2023, nearly [\\$700 billion](#) was spent, and the problem remains far from solved.

The real question is not, “Could we spend this dollar on something else?” Of course, we could. You can always redirect dollars. The real question is what is the best way to spend that dollar. What system produces the most good for the most time?

And research suggests that churches that focus on worship and doctrine do a better long-term job of addressing those problems.

For example, in its “[Caring for Those in Need](#)” report for 2025, the Church says it supported thousands of humanitarian projects across nearly the whole world and reports \$1.58 billion in expenditures and millions of volunteer hours. In [2024](#), it was \$1.45 billion, in [2023](#) it was \$1.36 billion, and in [2022](#) it was \$1.02 billion. And the projects they choose to spend on are those that will produce a virtuous cycle of improvement in the communities where they take place. Consider the self-reliance push of the Church’s welfare system. Consider BYU-Pathway and the Perpetual Education Fund. When it came to serving in the community, the Church didn’t just have members show up, they created JustServe, to create an engine to help local non-profits find volunteers. And the Church has focused on [improving neonatal care](#) by training nurses, and training nurse trainers, creating generations of healthy babies.

In raw annual dollars, the Church’s reported “caring for those in need” expenditures are greater than the humanitarian-assistance budget lines of wealthy governments, such as the UK or France. That is genuinely impressive, but also not really the point. The question worth asking is what kind of institution can keep doing that—not for a news cycle, but for generations?

Governments do it through taxation and policy. How does a church do it? Not by ignoring worship, to the contrary, largely through worship-shaped discipleship: regular participation, covenant obligation, the moral habit of sacrifice (tithing, fast offerings, time, callings), and thick community networks.

As we’ve seen in recent history, a church that forgets worship forgets why it serves. It may still do good for a while. But it begins to hollow out—spiritually, culturally, demographically—and eventually it loses the very capacity it once had to mobilize good.

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God turns
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community

So when critics say, “Stop spending on worship and spend it all on humanitarian aid,” they are—ironically—advocating to dismantle one of the most powerful known engines of mass voluntary generosity.

Worship is how God turns ordinary people into a durable community capable of extraordinary service.

So yes—celebrate humanitarian giving. Expand it. Partner widely. Be transparent where appropriate. Improve effectiveness. Learn from everyone.

And also: do not let anyone shame you into believing worship is wasted time.

Mary’s ointment filled a house with fragrance. A room full of people could smell her devotion.

The modern world is hungry for that fragrance—devotion that doesn’t flee from suffering, but also doesn’t pretend that suffering is the only thing worth talking about.

A relationship with Christ is not a side quest. It is the center.

And from that center—when it is real—flows a river of service that can outlast outrage, outlast politics, outlast the news cycle, outlast your own energy.

That’s not an argument against humanitarian work. It’s an argument for why the Church should keep being unapologetically a church.

About the author



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