



A PEOPLE CALLED TO LOVE

CHRISTIAN CHARITY IN NORTH AMERICAN SOCIETY

Justice and Charity: Finding Proper Responses to Social Questions and Social Needs

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For many Christians, social justice and social action are unfamiliar if not uncomfortable topics. Not without some justification, these are topics that have, at least in the West, been associated with Christians who tilt to the left of center in their theology and perhaps more importantly in their politics. Social justice and social action run on the same rails as social gospel—at least that’s how it seems. And for Christians with a conservative, Bible-shaped, gospel-proclamation-driven approach to life and church, social gospel is an unwelcome conversation partner. Admittedly, “social gospel” does drag with it an enormous amount of baggage—mired well beyond any idealistic hope of a salvage job within the space of a dozen pages. But to glibly and hastily assign social action and social justice to the same pigeon-hole as social gospel is simply to marginalize their relevance, silence their demands, and remove the burden of their expectation. It is all a bit too convenient. A call for social gospel is never in order. But a recognition of the Christian’s (and yes, the church’s) social responsibility is not only right; it is necessary and long overdue. Those who follow Christ have a solemn responsibility toward the world around them—toward society, and neglect of this responsibility under the guise of “preserving the gospel” will not do. The church, and the individual Christians who are the church, exist within creation to serve creation.

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Fundamental to the argument of this paper is the ability to distinguish the two kinds of righteousness.¹ The first kind of righteousness is the righteousness that is given freely through the life, death, and resurrection of Christ—the righteousness of faith. It is the righteousness that one has before the Creator and Lord of all purely by grace through faith. This righteousness is always primary and always must remain the central focus of the church and its people. Nothing that follows is intended to challenge the primacy of the gospel and its vigorous proclamation for the comfort of sinners. Christ has entrusted the proclamation of the gospel-reality to the church alone. No other human institution exists to fulfill this divine mandate, so the church dare not neglect her sacred charge. Nevertheless, faithfully living her primary *raison d'être* exhausts neither the church's resources nor its responsibilities. The other kind of righteousness, the righteousness of performance in human life and relationships, also makes its claim, and it must be heard and heeded.

The members of God's created realm, especially those who occupy that part of creation immediately surrounding each local manifestation of the church, are right to expect fellow creatures, who happen to be Christian, to shoulder their share of the tasks of earthly living. The fact that the church, and its members, lives in a right relationship to her creator, does not negate her continuing obligation to the rest of the creation. In fact, the reality that righteousness before God has been fully realized in Christ and his gifts in the means of grace, actually frees the church and her Christians to more actively engage in serving the needs of the creation. Put crassly, now that things are right with God and eternity is in the bag, the one who has righteousness before God has enormous amounts of free time with nothing to do but to focus on being the kind of creature God intended—that is, a creature who lives for the good of other creatures. So, social justice—God's intention for the right ordering and functioning of this realm, and social action—the business of a creature fulfilling his role within the world, are not only of *interest* to the Christian, they are of consuming *importance* as they describe his purpose within the created realm.

¹ Charles Arand provides an excellent introduction and overview of this distinction. See Robert Kolb and Charles Arand's, *The Genius of Luther's Theology* (Ada, MI: Baker Academic, 2008).

It should be evident that Luther's duality of the two realms also plays a critical role in this argument. One must be careful not to fall into a view of the created realm that is skewed in a Gnostic direction, viewing the material world as evil or, at least, as inconsequential. Since God is the creator and the preserver, it should be obvious that the material realm matters to God and so also must matter to those who are intent on living obediently before God. An uncompromising affirmation of the created realm is the clear message of Article 16 in the Augsburg Confession: "Concerning civic affairs they teach that lawful civil ordinances are good works of God and that Christians are permitted to hold civil office, to work in law courts, to decide matters . . ." ² And, a robust embrace of the created or civil realm is a recurrent theme in Luther's writing, providing the driving thesis in more than one document. ³ Neglect, much less denigration, of the created, material world is certainly not Lutheran or Christian. Indeed, such a dim view of creation runs in the way of world-dismissing Greek philosophy.

To embrace God's created realm is to embrace the cause of social justice and to engage zealously in social action. Gustaf Wingren expresses all of this quite succinctly:

God sets His Word of justification by faith, faith alone, and through this Word the song of praise is raised to Christ alone, who makes all so righteous and pure before God that nothing is lacking, while at the same time all human deeds and work 'are thrown down upon the earth'—*there* you have a function to perform. *There* you are to be engaged in the welfare of the neighbor and human community. ⁴

Wingren goes further, arguing that in the realm of this world, it is actually the neighbor who is to be enthroned . . . and *not* Christ. "Works are to be done here on earth with the neighbor as the only end." ⁵ The point is that taking care of "earthly" things is a fully human and therefore fully Christian thing for one to do. My neighbor needs me to meet my civil responsibilities. When he

² AC XVI, 1–2; Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 49.

³ See "Temporal Authority, to What Extent it is to be Obeyed," and "Can Soldiers too be Saved?" in LW vols. 45 and 46.

⁴ Gustaf Wingren, "Justification by Faith in Protestant Thought," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 9 (December 1956):374–383 (italics in original).

⁵ Wingren, 376.

is hungry, I must feed him. When he is naked, I must clothe him. When he is in prison, I must visit him. The neighbor is the object, the one enthroned in the Christian's good works in this world.⁶ Neither is there any danger of this emphasis on my neighbor's physical or material needs devolving into a sentimental, social gospel.⁷ The two kinds of righteousness paradigm serves to check this slide. Meeting his material needs is my responsibility as a fellow creature. Meanwhile, I remain keenly aware not only of my standing before God purely on the basis of Christ's work, which has nothing to do with my "neighborly service," but I also recognize the greatest need of my neighbor: that he too be righteous before God. This need must be addressed. It is, however, a separate concern and neither trumps nor negates the other immediate and tangible needs of my neighbor which are tied to existence in this world.

Thus, the Christian who is striving to live within the will of God demonstrates a twofold concern for his neighbor. He is driven by the command to proclaim the gospel of forgiveness and redemption to his neighbor, *and* he is committed to providing for his neighbor's physical and material needs, great and small. Both are legitimate concerns. Both areas of service to the neighbor have their source in the will of God, and each area of work is significant and important in its own right. The immediate application is a rather pointed polemic against what seems to be a near universally accepted assumption in Christian parishes: works of charity are done as avenues for the proclamation of the gospel—or worse yet, such works of kindness become the gospel itself and supplant the proclamation of Christ crucified and risen for the restoration of fallen creation.⁸ Recognition of the legitimacy and significance of both gospel proclamation and social action should teach, rather, the need to do each work for its own sake. Works of service

6 It is interesting to note that in Jesus's parable of the sheep and the goats (Matthew 25: 31–46) the righteous have no idea that they are actually serving their Lord, they see only the neighbor. By serving the neighbor, God's will is accomplished, and so God is praised.

7 The social gospel of the early twentieth century was notorious for its tendency to correspond neatly with the prevailing liberal political agenda of the day; typically leading to an interest in activities and causes that promised to generate good feelings for the benefactor and presumably the recipient.

8 This is precisely the error of the social gospel.

within the created realm are not equivalent to, or even tokens of, the articulation of the word of the gospel.⁹

On the other hand, works of kindness within the created realm do not need to be justified by their connection to some attempt at gospel proclamation. In other words, the congregation's soup kitchen is not validated by slipping a gospel tract onto the tray with the dessert. Nor is a coat drive somehow redeemed or baptized by extending invitations to the congregation's Sunday worship service to those who receive its gifts of kindness. These acts of kindness are legitimate and right simply for what they are without trying to wrap them in a gospel robe of righteousness. They are already righteous. They are works of righteousness aimed at meeting the very real material needs of very real fellow creatures. It is God-given, God-pleasing work simply as it stands. The congregation of believers that recognizes the need for the food pantry in their community may move to establish that act of charity, but need not couple it with some form of evangelism for the sake of legitimizing the service. At the same time, such a venture should not be conducted in the name of evangelism, or funded by that part of the budget labeled, "evangelism." A food pantry is a good work, and even may be an appropriate work for a congregation, but it is not evangelism.

Since the work of social action is done in the realm of God's left hand, it is quite fitting that left-hand criteria guide its practice. This means that a congregation or a Christian may be safely guided in an effort to aid the neighbor by simple attention to God's law. Recent years have witnessed a long-overdue retrieval of the notion of natural law as the rightful guide for life in the created realm, and the case can be successfully argued that God's law (as summarily articulated in the Decalogue) and natural law are not at odds but, in fact, the same.¹⁰ Hence, the sanctified use of common sense (the rarity of which in our culture belies and seriously challenges

⁹ It is altogether astounding, then, to hear St. Francis routinely and approvingly quoted by otherwise orthodox ministers: "Preach Christ always—when necessary use words." A more egregious or detrimental confusion of the two realms and the two kinds of righteousness is difficult to imagine.

¹⁰ An excellent resource on the importance of natural law for contemporary society, as well as its fundamental agreement with "divine" law, is J. Budziszewski, *What We Can't Not Know: A Guide* (Dallas: Spence Publishing Company), 2003.

this traditional moniker) is quite appropriate as a guide for discerning exactly what course of action is best. The congregation and the individual Christian must consider the reality of the needs that they see in the world around them and then take into account the available resources and likely outcomes of any given action. This may be, of course, quite utilitarian and pragmatic, but in the realm of the left-hand it is also quite fitting. The overwhelming and guiding concern is the extension of God's law into all of the creation and into every human relationship within the society.

Certainly, the application of the law to human society was a driving motivation for the Old Testament prophets. Their repeated calls for social rectitude and the rule of law are well known, and are summarized by their zeal for justice. Isaiah made the appeal in his first chapter: "Learn to do good; seek justice, reprove the ruthless; defend the orphan, plead for the widow" (Is 1:17). And Jeremiah made a similar exhortation: "Thus says the Lord, 'Do justice and righteousness, and deliver the one who has been robbed from the power of his oppressor. Also do not mistreat or do violence to the stranger, the orphan, or the widow; and do not shed innocent blood in this place'" (Jer 22:3). Justice was the critical goal for society. And, it needs to be remembered, this is not an outdated Old Testament goal, but simply the goal of God for the right functioning of his left hand in the material world of creation. It is essential, then, to come to a solid understanding of justice and its demand on Christians who seek to live faithfully within the created realm.

Not surprisingly, some of the most carefully developed studies of justice arise within Roman Catholic moral theology—a vibrant aspect of Roman Catholic thinking for many centuries. Josef Pieper represents this tradition well, and provides the standard, succinct definition of justice: "It is the notion that each man is to be given what is his due."¹¹ This capable definition can be traced back to Plato and Aristotle (who in the realm of the left hand *do* often arrive at accurate insights), and has changed little since. From an American perspective, it is more than merely interesting to note that a right understanding of justice is altogether different

11 Josef Pieper, *Justice*, trans. Lawrence E. Lynch (New York: Pantheon Books, 1955).

than the claims of equity or equality. An egalitarian ideal would treat all people the same without regard for individual differences. When scrupulously applied, egalitarianism leads to a radical diminution of the person as she is simply lumped into the category of humanity and then treated like every other human—as if humans really were all the same! Justice provides a much better standard, as it demands taking into account individual situations and distinctions.

Justice takes into account the needs, the previous wrongs done, and even the potentialities of the person and the situation, and then acts appropriately. What is due one person is not necessarily what is due another. Justice recognizes this truth—as do all observant and wise parents in guiding their children. At times, a blind application of equity results in gross injustice. Further, it should be clear that the practice of justice is not inevitably harsh, and certainly allows for acts of mercy and compassion when such are fitting. In the left-hand realm, directed as it is by the law, justice is both norm and goal, even for the Christian—who in the realm before God, of course, functions quite differently, cherishing and living by grace alone.

Striving to give to each what is his due presents a significant goal and an ongoing challenge for the church and for the individual Christian. The need of the neighbor will often be manifest in social injustices. The Christian, driven by love for neighbor and zeal for the neighbor to receive justice, will have no choice but to be involved actively in the naming and overthrowing of injustice. It should not be assumed, however, that issues of such importance will be immediately recognized, or even agreed upon by all Christians. Determining what is due each man is a practice fraught with difficulties and subject to widely divergent opinions—even among fellow church members. This should not be surprising, nor should it cause much concern. What it should reinforce, however, is the need to distinguish between individual Christians and the congregations to which they belong and the synods and denominations to which the congregations, in turn, belong. While the principles of focusing on the need of the neighbor and advocating justice within society remain the same, the application of the principles or the rules for societal engagement differ between the individual Christian and the corporate body of Christ. What an individual Christian may be able to do in service to his neighbor, a congregation may

not be able to do. For example, an individual Christian might conclude that his neighbor's need requires him to campaign aggressively for the full amnesty of illegal aliens. A congregation, on the other hand, may well need to exercise more restraint as questions of obedience to the law of the land and justice for legal residents may well prevent other Christians from embracing such an agenda.

Individual Christians have tremendous liberty in their work for the sake of their neighbor and their advocacy of justice. Essentially, they are free to respond to whichever needs they encounter, and may take action entirely as they desire; of course, within the constraints of God's revealed will, the law. Aware that the neighbor of the Good Samaritan was the one near at hand who needed what the Samaritan had to give, Christians will concentrate their efforts on meeting the needs of the *near* neighbor. This often means a far greater and more personal investment than simply pointing and clicking a web-donation for disaster relief hundreds or even thousands of miles distant. The widow next door will, no doubt, present immediate and significant claims on the Christian—claims which the Christian is uniquely situated to fulfill. The Christian will also be sensitive to neighborhood and community concerns which legitimately demand attention. Of course, the needs he sees will not necessarily be the ones that his sister in the faith sees and addresses.¹² Further, because the believer acts as an individual, she can choose even marginal or controversial areas for activity (as illustrated above) without the entanglement of convincing the rest of her congregation to agree with her (Or, it should be noted, without fear of compromising the reputation of a congregation or synod.) In short, a Christian is free, actually under obligation, to meet the needs of her neighbors to the extent that she has resources to do so. Beyond those resources and God's law, there is no limit.

Likewise, congregations face the reality of limited resources. But, they must also take into account further restrictions on their left-hand realm activities. To begin, it must be reiterated that the church's overriding and consuming purpose must be the proclamation of the gospel

¹² A happy outcome is that the variety of potential responses to diversely perceived needs greatly multiplies the likelihood of many needs being met.

and the faithful celebration of the sacraments. Not only are these the marks of the church, they are the defining and directing business of the church. In light of the privilege and responsibility of bearing the gospel to the rest of creation, anything else that the church chooses to do must be recognized as occupying a far-distant second place. Having said, that, however, there *are* things that may occupy that second place—none more compelling than action on behalf of the neighbor in need. It is critical, however, that when the Christian congregation determines that it is appropriate to act for the sake of a neighbor in need, it must be certain that the social action is not undertaken at the expense of the gospel’s proclamation. Obviously, allocation of time and finances is an important factor. A congregation should not trim the evangelism budget, for example, in order to underwrite a new day-care project. Nor should it become so obsessed with raising money or recruiting volunteers for the latest “service project” that the task of proclaiming the gospel is obscured or neglected altogether.

Here, again, it is crucial that the congregation distinguish the two realms and recognize that its business in the work of aiding or sustaining the material needs of the neighbor is not some form of gospel proclamation, much less a substitute for the same. Finally, the congregation must also evaluate the propriety of involving its resources (and its name) in activities that may actually compromise the congregation’s ability to proclaim the gospel. Through the congregation’s involvement in social action the community may begin to identify the congregation with whatever social action has been undertaken. Making this determination is not always easy. It must be prompted by the obligation to uphold the law of God as well as the desire not to offend unnecessarily.

The congregation, like the individual, will be guided by the twin dictum of the neighbor’s need and the promotion of justice. So, the level of the congregation’s social activity will also be commensurate with the degree of the injustice, and the availability or absence of others to help the one in need. When the violation of God’s law—that is, injustice—is great and the number of those coming to the aid of the one afflicted is small or inadequate, the time is right for the church

to act.¹³ Other congregations may see it differently, and individuals within the congregation may not all agree, but when a Christian congregation sees a neighbor in need of justice, it may—and on occasion must—choose to act. The same applies to the activities and social statements of congregations that act collectively as synods and denominations.

While Christians, congregations, and synods will agree virtually unanimously on the central, doctrinal issues, when attention is turned to issues of social policy and social action, those same groups may disagree quite ardently. Robert Benne has done careful and helpful work on the church's twofold areas of service and existence.¹⁴ He honors the distinction between the two realms and recognizes the proclamation of the gospel as the church's driving purpose. A particularly helpful contribution is his use of concentric circles to represent the church's areas of responsibility and activity.¹⁵ The innermost of these circles represents the doctrinal foundation of the church. The contents of this central circle are not open to debate—they are the core teachings of the faith. The ring immediately surrounding this core represents the church's moral teaching, reflecting the Ten Commandments and the explication of natural law. Next, follows a ring that represents “the more speculative theological reflections of the church, including its social teachings.”¹⁶ Here, the church's theologians strive to apply the core vision to the changing realities of society. Finally, there is a ring for the church's position on specific policy issues.

Benne summarizes:

The central religious and moral visions ought to be held with clarity, confidence, and steadfastness. They have the highest degree of authority and consensus in the church. The outer circles are much more susceptible to genuine and permissible disagreement. Moreover, as one moves toward the outer circles, the church has less and less warrant and knowledge for pronouncing or acting upon its judgments.¹⁷

13 An issue like abortion on demand, it should be clear, is a particularly compelling example of an occasion for the church to act.

14 See especially Robert Benne, *The Paradoxical Vision: A Public Theology for the Twenty-first Century* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995).

15 Benne, 69–76.

16 Benne, 73.

17 Benne, 74.

Benne's rings provide a helpful tool and check for Christians and the Christian congregation that are eager to take seriously the reality of living within two realms—as justified children of God striving to serve the neighbor's need within the creation.¹⁸

Though broken by sin, the world and its inhabitants remain God's good creation. It is the privilege of God's elect people to care for this creation—the brokenness of sin only makes this care more necessary, and more difficult. Efforts at staunching the hemorrhage of this broken world will always be uncertain, faltering, and inadequate—even when sincerely undertaken. Still, service done for the sake of the neighbor in the name of justice is the obligation of God's creatures. And when done in the hope and promise of the final and full restoration of the whole of creation at our Lord's appearing, no such task is ever in vain.

¹⁸ Thus, for example, a congregation will be unswerving in its position on salvation by grace through faith in Christ alone, but quite tolerant of a wide variety of opinions on the wisdom of increasing the minimum wage in America.