



A PEOPLE CALLED TO LOVE

CHRISTIAN CHARITY IN NORTH AMERICAN SOCIETY

Being a Charitable People: Can Christians Join with Others to Serve Their Neighbors?

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All Christians, it seems safe to say, would agree *that* charity is their responsibility. Certainly they should. The Lord Christ himself taught his people that they should be charitable and also what charity means when he identified “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” as one of the great commandments (Mt 22:39–40; see also Mk 12:31 and Lk 10:27–28), and when he said, “So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them” (Mt 7:12; see also Lk 6:31).¹ This instruction, moreover, was given already through Moses and the prophets (“for this is the Law and the Prophets” Mt 7:12b) and reinforced later by the apostles (see Rom 13:9, Gal 5:14).

But it also seems safe to say that Christians often disagree about *how* they should be responsible for charity. What one person will think is an individual Christian’s responsibility, another will see as an entire congregation’s, and yet another will understand it as an issue for civil government—and so Christians disagree about who should show charity in particular situations. Still another person may argue that the situation does not call for charity at all—and, when that happens, Christians disagree to whom charity should be shown. Or perhaps a Christian congregation agrees about a charitable course of action, but they do not think they can do it alone. Can we go in with someone else? Some say, “Sure—it’s a matter of civil righteousness.” Others caution, “Well, this might compromise our witness.” And so they disagree about those with whom they might cooperate or sponsor in charitable activities. To be sure, not all

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congregations experience such differences and disagreements. But they seem common enough to take seriously.

“Fair enough,” you might acknowledge, “but what counts as taking these differences ‘seriously’?” As a starting point, I would observe that the string of differences just imagined does not involve merely the broad issue of Christian charity. Taken together, we can see that they more specifically involve issues about individual Christians and certain institutions such as the local congregation. This observation simplifies nothing, but it does suggest that we could fruitfully deal with some of these differences by construing them as different sorts of “people problems.” By “people problem” I mean considering the issue in terms of the different people involved (and not various interpersonal difficulties). We should consider the issue in terms of our neighbors in need; of fellow Christians who participate in works of charity; and of others in the world who might also participate in works of charity. This is by no means the only way to proceed, but I do think it is valid. *What you think about it is another thing, I realize; in the end, my thinking may cause us to differ and disagree.* I am not promising to eliminate differences and disagreements. I am only suggesting how we might deal with some of them.

Concerning our neighbors and their needs

If we are going to talk about decisions concerning charity, then we should be clear about *those to whom charity should be shown*. As noted already, Christians should know that charity is their responsibility, because Christ himself taught us.

Jesus, however, said nothing surprising. Even the expert in the law who wanted to test Jesus knew the commandment. But Luke’s Gospel also tells us that this lawyer wanted to justify himself, and so asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” Jesus responded with the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:29–37), and he showed that the people of God should be “neighborly” to any and all in need. The Gospels include other similar teachings about charity, including this passage from the Sermon on the Mount:

[Jesus said:] “You have heard it said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and

hate your enemy.⁷ But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect (Mt 5:43–48; see also Lk 6:27–36: “Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful” [v. 36]).

All of this is very familiar, so the key question is not whether the Lord commanded love for our neighbor, but whether we actually will “keep all he has commanded” (Mt 28:19). The answer to this question hangs on another question: What makes it difficult to keep this word of the Lord? The answer is—*risk*.

Risk is a problem Christians have in general when it comes to righteousness. Christians frequently imagine that righteousness should be safe and predictable, but God’s righteousness is dangerous and unpredictable. Consider righteousness before God (i.e., “righteousness of faith” or “passive/alien righteousness”). It is frequently difficult for Christians to accept that the church should dispense righteousness before God to people freely and unconditionally, even when it is acknowledged that the church has the authority to do so.² Why? Because nothing can prevent a person from using the righteousness given them as a license to continue sinning. They can take forgiveness of sin as an excellent reason to continue to live and do as they please. We see this as dangerous both for those pardoned (because it might sustain their sinful habits) and for the church who does the pardoning (because, as a result, it will have no surefire way to maintain order). So, for instance, some churches make absolution conditional on the intentions or activities of the penitent. Therefore, instead of saying “I, by virtue of my office as a called and ordained servant of the Word, forgive you all your sins,” a pastor may say: “If you truly repent of your sins, then know that your sins are forgiven for Christ’s sake.” Here the church maintains the control it perceives that it needs over the dangerous situation of granting forgiveness, but instead

² There are other ways in which the righteousness of faith (i.e., justification by grace through faith) is understood as risky, such as the authority implied in forgiving sinners (the same problem Jesus had when he forgave the paralytic [Mt 9:1–8]). But, as we will see, the danger that forgiveness might be taken as license also parallels a common problem with active righteousness.

of outright, unconditional forgiveness of sins, the hearers are invited to justify themselves.

It is the same way with our righteousness before other men (i.e., “righteousness of works” such as charity, or “active righteousness”). Here, Christ commands us to be like God—to be merciful just as our Father in heaven. Just as it is risky to forgive sinners, because they might receive it without faith and misuse the grace, so it is risky to do good for the ungrateful, because they might receive it without thanks and misuse the help! This is so hard that some preachers take these words of Jesus (Mt 5:48) as proof that Jesus is not telling us to do something but rather showing us what we are incapable of doing!

The problem is that we think everything is up to us. Instead, we should leave room for God. Our responsibilities are real, but penultimate. In matters of passive righteousness, we are responsible to convey God’s forgiveness and promises of life and salvation, but it is up to God to instill faith and work renewal. We are responsible to love our neighbors, but it is up to God whether love is reciprocated. Ultimately, faith, faithfulness, wisdom, and gratitude are up to God. In matters of active righteousness (including charity), this means that whether charity is received gratefully or not is *up to God*. If anything, we should err on the side of love. Just as God is good and prospers both the just and the unjust, we should show kindness and love toward all people and help every person in need, even those who despise or take advantage of us. It is as Luther said in the Large Catechism: “Therefore it is God’s real intention that we should allow no one to suffer harm but show every kindness and love. And this kindness, as I said, is directed especially toward our enemies. For doing good to our friends is nothing but an ordinary virtue of pagans, as Christ says in Matthew 5[:46–47].”³

One common if subtle way of falling into the “ordinary virtue of pagans” is basing our decisions about charity on whether or how likely our help might serve as opportunity for evangelism. It is one thing (and a good thing) to realize that any instance of showing love might

³ LC I.193–194 (Fifth Commandment) from Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert’s, eds. *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000).

become an opportunity for evangelism and to be prepared to seize the moment. But it is quite another (and a bad thing) to make the likelihood of evangelism a criterion for deciding between opportunities for charity.⁴

Having said this, one might still ask about the advantage that some people will take of Christians who do just what Jesus says. Should we pay no attention to this problem? First, we should note that this question reflects the fear we have just been discussing. If the concern is about ourselves, Christ's teachings make it clear that *we* should not worry about when advantage is taken of ourselves. Such concerns are pagan. But concern for the disadvantaged should lead *us* to take care that no one takes advantage of *them*.

On being a charitable people

Some doubt whether all this is possible. For example, as I noted earlier, some conclude that the Lord's words about love of enemies is an impossible teaching for us to keep, and that their purpose is to lead us to repent of our utter inability to do God's will. I have raised this not to enter into a debate either about the interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount or about the uses of the law, but to note that when this happens, concern has shifted from those to whom charity should be shown to *those who are supposed to be charitable*, that is, to ourselves.

We can prevent this shift by thinking about our *politics*, that is, the ways and logic of our lives together. When members of a congregation come together, they involve themselves in a political process. The divine service is a political event (political overtones of *leitourgia* remain when Christians appropriate the term). Baptism is a political event. Communion is a political event—and so is excommunication. But the term “church politics,” like “office politics” or even just “politics,” often carries negative connotations. We should recognize that these connotations have to do with a certain kind of politics, not with politics as such. But we should also recognize that the reason “church politics” has negative connotations nowadays is that the politics seen in

⁴ It is the same with other activities or institutions a congregation might sponsor, such as providing education or child care.

the church frequently resembles the politics of American civil society—and these politics can be ugly. The resemblance is no accident. Stanley Hauerwas hit the nail on the head when he said:

The church finds itself in a time when people have accepted the odd idea that Christianity is largely what they do with their own subjectivities. Politically we live in social orders that assume the primary task is how to achieve cooperation between strangers. Indeed we believe our freedom depends on remaining fundamentally strangers to one another. We bring those habits to church, and as a result we do not share fundamentally the story of being God’s creatures, but rather, if we share any story at all, it is that we are our own creators. Christians once understood that they were pilgrims. Now, we are just tourists who happen to find ourselves on the same bus.

These “social orders” would include civil politics, economics, and education. The Bill of Rights, which secures such rights as freedom of religion and freedom of speech, only makes sense in light of the assumption that Americans are supposed to “believe our freedom depends on remaining fundamentally strangers to one another.” Rights insure that each person may remain autonomous. The modern marketplace assumes that society is a collection of strangers *and* helps to keep it that way, because it caters to and is driven by the desires of individual consumers and offers goods in neat packages and convenient displays that hide the traces of production—including the *people* who produced them. Modern education likewise assumes that we will be strangers and so equips students for lives as autonomous individuals who very well may have to make their own way in the world.

With these kinds of social orders, it is no wonder American civil politics are so often concerned about the same two things—individual liberties and social justice. Consider two of today’s “hot-button” topics: abortion and same-sex marriage. The political question about abortion is not about whether abortion is good or evil; it is about the woman’s right to choose. The political question about same-sex marriage is not about whether homosexuality is good or evil; it is about the rights of “consenting adults” (itself a notion that makes sense only in this political context).

The same politics—the same ways and logic of life together—have worked their way into many American churches, and they seem assumed by a lot of American Christians. We can

see this in the way Christians debate issues like church music and methods for evangelism—like Americans.⁵ Of course, many think that there is no alternative, because this is simply how people argue. Such thinking, however, shows that we work with habits of thought and action deeply ingrained by social orders.

Civil societies may debate the question of whether or not they should constitute themselves under the assumption that citizens are going to be and should be strangers to one another, but this debate should not take place in Christian churches. This is because, as Hauerwas indicated, we are supposed to be a people who share—indeed, who are constituted by—the story of God the creator, who redeems through his Son, Jesus Christ, and sanctifies by the power of his Spirit. To share in this story, moreover, is not simply to be one of those who has heard and now tells the same story, but actually to have been made participants in it through the word and Spirit of God.

We can understand how the root problem in our own politics is sin. In the beginning, God made human beings in his image, which meant that they would be images of God in or toward creation (the notion of “having dominion”). But this was not enough. Adam and Eve, prompted by the devil, wanted to be like God in all ways, knowing both good and evil. They got what they wished for, first, in knowing good and evil (and in seeing themselves as evil!), and second, in becoming “gods,” that is, thinking of themselves as creators and rulers. It has been that way ever since. The good news is that God the creator, through his Son, Jesus Christ, and by the power of his Spirit, redeems “false creators” from their self-idolatry and makes them creatures in his image once again, creatures who live by faith and freely and spontaneously do the will of God.

With this understanding of “politics,” we can now return to our theme: on being a charitable people. In terms of politics, we should recognize that the basic political task of the church is neither to organize our life together (e.g., establish a constitution) nor to establish rules and institutions. These things certainly have important places, but they are not basic. The basic

⁵ For more about American civil politics and its impact on the church, see my short piece, “Seeking the Good Together,” *Concordia Journal* 30 (July 2004): 113–116.

political task of the church is to be the means by which God continues to constitute for himself a holy people. The basic task of a charitable people is not to seek to *do* charity, but to become a sanctified people who readily and selflessly follow the will of God by trusting always in God and in showing love to all our neighbors.

How does this come about? It comes by the Spirit of God, given through the gospel that justifies and sanctifies sinners. In other words, the basic political task of the church is *justification* by preaching the gospel and administering the sacraments. Those who receive God's grace through faith are also sanctified. All sorts of good works, including being in agreement with God and his people in leading our lives and in being charitable, flow naturally and freely from justification.⁶ It may be dangerous and unpredictable, but it is also the way to holiness and all its fruits and benefits—including benefits in and through congregations.

This answer may sound familiar enough, but too often it is something held more in spoken confession than ordinary thought, speech, and action. This recognition is supported especially by those who do not think that active righteousness is the gift of God, that is, those who do not expect renewal. These people would include those who subscribe to the slogan, "Christians aren't perfect, just forgiven"; those who think that the point of the saying, "good works are necessary," is for urging Christians to do good works, because they are necessary; those who teach, "in justification, God does everything, but in sanctification, we cooperate with God"; and those who think Lutheran preaching tends to talk too much about justification and needs also to talk about the Christian life. It is one thing to recognize that each of these contains some truth, but it is quite another to fail to understand how each is a misleading half-truth. Christians are renewed by the Spirit and made holy and perfect. They are in reality and not just

⁶ "However, when people are born again through the Spirit of God and set free from the law (that is, liberated from its driving powers and driven by the Spirit of Christ), they live according to the unchanging will of God, as comprehended in the law, and do everything, insofar as they are reborn, from a free and merry spirit. Works of this kind are not, properly speaking, works of the law but works and fruits of the Spirit . . ." (FC SD VI.17) This conviction is embodied in such Lutheran slogans as "sanctification follows justification" and "good works are necessary." It is vital, however, that these be understood first of all as descriptive of the justified ("what we are"), and only secondarily as prescriptive ("what we are supposed to be").

in name “saints,” even though they are also in reality “sinners.” Therefore, as saints, Christians simply do good works; they are the necessary and natural fruit of justification. In justification, not only does God declare the sinner righteous, but he makes them righteous, too; he does not just give the justified a second chance or leg up on holiness. Thus, the last illustration may come closest to the heart of the matter: the problem is that Lutheran preaching can tend to talk too much *about* justification, but the answer, as I have been arguing, lies in the act of justification itself, not in talk about sanctification or faithfulness or obedience or responsibilities.

To be sure, the preaching of the law *constantly* will be required, and it will always be needed to teach Christians how to lead their lives and to lead them to do so. Sanctification in this age is never complete or perfect. Indeed, just as Christians are true saints by virtue of the Holy Spirit, they also remain real sinners by virtue of the Old Adam. Therefore, even Christians will continue to be people who think themselves creators of their own lives, who are unable to get along with others, and who are unwilling to be merciful just as God the Father is merciful. This is why even Christians need the teaching, urging, warning, threat, and punishment of the Law throughout their lives.⁷ For Christian lives of charity, then, there will always be a place to speak about our responsibilities and opportunities to show love and to caution against self-centeredness and complacency.

To do this, we should not turn only to specific commands like “Love your neighbor as yourself.” We should also pay attention to the account of God as the creator and redeemer, or,

⁷ “Since, however, believers in this life are not perfectly, wholly, *completive vel consummative* [completely or entirely] renewed—even though their sin is completely covered up by the perfect obedience of Christ so that this sin is not reckoned to them as damning, and even though the killing of the old creature and the renewal of their minds in the Spirit has begun—nevertheless, the old creature still continues to hang on in their nature and all of its inward and outward powers... Therefore, in this life, because of these desires of the flesh, the faithful, elect, reborn children of God need not only the law’s daily instruction and admonition, its warning and threatening. Often they also need its punishments, so that they may be incited by them and follow God’s Spirit, as it is written, “It is good for me that I was humbled, so that I might learn your statutes” [Ps. 119:71]” (FC SD VI. 7, 9 Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert, eds. *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 588.

as Hauerwas put it, “the story of being God’s creatures.” This is particularly true with love for our neighbor, because Christ explicitly says that we should be merciful just as God our Father is merciful. God’s mercifulness is not given us primarily in a set of rules and principles, but shown to us in various stories. The definitive stories are the story of Israel and the gospel of Jesus Christ (“Old Testament” and “New Testament”), but the story of our own lives, as we have been made members of the new Israel and been redeemed by Christ, also testify not only *that* God is merciful but *how*. The “how” is most important, for it *defines* mercy and charity, that is, it shows us what counts as mercy and charity in the first place. Knowing how God is merciful, we might be even more clear about our responsibilities and even more capable of and faithful in discussing and debating the opportunities and challenges that arise.

How might we work with others in the world?

Living the story of our own lives as those redeemed by Christ means to turn in mercy to those in need around us. The needs of others are frequently easy for everyone to see. The sights of hungry children and sick people and decaying cities and ruined fields move all kinds of people to try in all kinds of ways to relieve misery and restore lives. Often these needs prompt cooperation between different groups of people. Perhaps the most obvious instances of cooperation happen when a disaster strikes, but cooperation on behalf of the poor, the sick, the homeless, the neglected, and the oppressed takes place all the time. Much cooperation among Christians of different confessions and between Christians and non-Christians happens without even thinking about whether it might be problematic, and that is often just how it should be.

But sometimes it is asked and debated whether we can join with Christians of other confessions or with non-Christians in charitable efforts, and if so, how we might appropriately participate. I alluded to such debates in the introduction.

When the question is “*Can* we join with those who do not share our confession and faith?” then the answer is “Yes.” The reason may be given in terms of *active righteousness*—love for our neighbor. Someone might object that cooperation will run the risk of being mistaken or

compromising our witness or stance. These are real risks, and we need to be discerning. But the simple possibility of problems is not a sufficient reason not to participate. Those who think so perhaps are failing to leave such things that belong to God in God's hands.

But the fact that we may participate does not mean that we *should*, and discerning the answer to this question is usually a more difficult matter. It is clear enough that our neighbors' needs and troubles show us *that* charity is required. The issue is whether working with people of other Christian confessions, other religions, or secular organizations will compromise or confuse our witness to God. In terms of the two kinds of righteousness, the issue is whether our participation in acts of active righteousness will compromise our confession of passive righteousness.

To sort out this issue, we should recognize that our talk about "compromise" and "confusion" are still ambiguous. *Who* will think we are compromising our witness? *Who* will be confused about our confession?⁸ If *we* think we are compromising or confusing our message, then we should not participate, at least in this particular way. This is not so much because others will find us compromised or confused. After all, they might not think so. Rather it is a matter of integrity for us. But there are other kinds of observers or interpreters of our actions. They would include those with whom we are participating, those for whom charity is intended, and various sorts of outsiders (e.g., neighboring congregations, members of the church body, members and leaders of the civic community, members and leaders of charitable organizations, members of the news media). There is no way (simple or otherwise) to determine who will be "reading" our actions, much less any way to control these readings.

It is always worth keeping in mind that in his own life Jesus was widely misunderstood. He did good things for people in need, and yet some were ungrateful (e.g., the nine cleansed

⁸ These are questions about what Paul Robinson and James Voelz call "the semiotics of participation" in their essay "What Am I Doing Here?: The Semiotics of Participation in Public Gatherings," in *Witness and Worship in Pluralistic America*, ed. John F. Johnson (St. Louis: Office of the President, Concordia Seminary, 2003), 61–65. Although their essay centers around questions of participation in such events as community worship services, their analysis of the questions raised by Christians participating with others is helpful for the situations with which we are dealing, and goes much deeper into identifying and discussing different relevant issues than I touch on here.

lepers who did not return to thank him) and many who saw him did not believe in him. None of this, however, deterred him in the slightest, even though it eventually cost him his life. But God raised Jesus from the dead, showing not only that he is his Son and Anointed One, but vindicating his life—a life of love for others that he also gives us to follow.⁹

Concluding thoughts

It is not hard to see that the issue of Christians' decisions about charity is very complicated. It is so complicated that I did not even think about trying to unpack it. Instead, I proceeded by considering the issue as a “people problem,” that is, concerning the different characters in these situations: the neighbors in need, ourselves both as those who should be charitable and as those trying to decide about charity, and others with whom we might join in charitable activities. Of course, even within those parameters, there is a lot to think about, but, again, I did not even try to survey all those things. Instead, I focused on a few key topics: righteousness, politics, stories, justification and sanctification, and the meaning(s) of our actions.

If you have read this far, you might wonder why I did not identify God as a character in all these situations. But, in fact, I have with a theme that ran throughout: “letting God be God.” Letting God be God is what makes forgiving sinners and loving enemies challenging. Letting God be God is what makes the story and politics of the church run counter to the story and politics of America. Letting God be God is what makes hearing Jesus's words and following his example so difficult. But failing to let God be God—failing to trust him or depend on him—is giving in to idolatry, and idolatry, no matter how attractive or effective or helpful is still idolatry. Nothing can justify it or those who indulge in it.

In this approach I am doing nothing more than what Luther does in the Small Catechism. All of this (and more) is already embedded in the explanations of the commandments. These

⁹ Here I am trying to practice what I have preached earlier about paying attention to the *story*.

explanations always refer first to the first commandment: “We should fear and love God . . .”

They all presuppose God as creator and redeemer; they all presuppose that God is God. And so it is with our neighbor and his welfare: “We should fear and love God so that we do not hurt or harm our neighbor in his body, but help and befriend him in every bodily need.”