

Christian Stewardship, A Third World View

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The Church has a responsibility to identify, set out, and promote, by whatever means available to it the basic teachings of the Bible concerning the following:

1. *The nature and status of Humanity;*
2. *The non-human resources of the earth;*
3. *The nature and implications of disinterested love as the term is used by Christ in the Sermon on the Mount and by Paul in writing to the Corinthian Church (1 Cor. 13);*
4. *The meaning of worship and the relationship between worship and human relations;*
5. *The meaning of righteousness in biblical usage and its implications for economic activity and the use of power;*
6. *The relationship between the concept of the Kingdom and the challenge of 'total development.'*

1. The nature and status of Humanity

Human beings are called to reflect God's own character in respect to authority over the non-human areas of creation and responsibility for husbanding the resources of the earth from which human needs are to be met (Gen. 1: 26-31). Every human being is therefore of inestimable worth by virtue of being human and not by the fiat of anyone or by means of any charter granted by a state. The right to life, freedom, community, and self-determination is therefore inherent in the fact of humanity's relationship to God.

It is for this reason, therefore, that God exerts pressure on earthly authorities and institutions to ensure that people's dignity is not violated by undue restrictions upon their freedom as in slavery or "ghetto" life (Exodus 19: 1-6). Jesus reaffirms this by declaring that the purpose of his coming is that human beings may live abundantly or that there might be no limit to their freedom as responsible and creative beings (John 10: 10).

The Incarnation itself is further testimony to God's commitment to the preservation of a person's essential humanity against any attempt to undermine or destroy it by manipulation, deprivation, discrimination or any such thing.

The indiscriminate nature of God's commitment to humanity's freedom from the consequences of hunger, isolation, undue exposure, and abandonment is simply attested to in Jesus' parable in Matthew 25. Our acceptability with God is seen to be dependent upon our willingness to accept the responsibility

for ensuring the neighbour's well-being in freedom from these conditions.

2. *The use of Non-Human (Economic) Resources*

It is part of the shame of modern life, whatever our political persuasion, economic status, or religious orientation, that in most societies it is so easy to live within situations where the overpaid, overfed, the arrogantly overclad and overhoused, and the naively overschooled live and work daily with those who are very obviously chronically unemployed, malnourished, naked, unsheltered, and totally unschooled, in some cases in the same neighbourhood and on the same street. It is an even greater shame that the majority of places where these conditions exist in juxtaposition are not only nominally Christian but also "over-churched."

What makes it very difficult to speak of a Christian position on the issue of the use of the resources of the earth is that Christians are known to be so equivocal on the issue. On the one hand, we affirm God's ownership of all resources, God's Fatherhood of all humanity and disinterested and indiscriminate love of and concern for all persons. On the other hand, we find support in scriptures for our indifference to the inequalities in access to resources for basic existence—water, food, shelter, medical care, opportunity for getting and using mental and manual skills; employment; equality of incomes from similar types of employment; opportunity for advancement at the workplace and the right of choice where alternatives exist.

Despite this equivocation and despite what is said in passages seemingly requiring physical exertion and perspiration (Gen. 3: 19) there is no doubt whatever in the practice and affirmations of Jesus that the meeting of humanity's basic needs must be a primary responsibility of the community and that remuneration for work done should be based on needs rather than on such factors as length of service, education, etc. (cf. The Parable of the Labourers in the Vineyard, Matt. 20: 1-16). This means that in the light of the Christian ethic of "neighbour-regarding love," no excesses or luxuries should be permitted to anyone until the basic needs of all members of society are provided for. By extension, this means that profits, rents, perquisites, commissions, etc., should be seen in relation to conditions prevailing in a given society.

This is very clearly what is implied in the condemnations of flagrant injustices and inequities in situations in Israel's history, (cp. Amos 6: 1-7; 8: 4-6). What is expressed in these biblical injunctions is, of course, increasingly reflected in modern confessional statements of many churches. The Presbyterian Confession, for example, states in part:

The Church calls upon every man to use his abilities, his possessions, and the fruits of technology as gifts entrusted to him by God for the maintenance of his family and the advancement of the common welfare. It encourages these forces in human society that raise men's hopes for better conditions and provide them with opportunity for a decent living. A church that is indifferent to poverty, or evades responsibility in economic affairs, is open to one social class only, or expects gratitude for its

beneficence, makes a mockery of reconciliation and offers no acceptable worship to God.¹

What baffles, especially the victims of the exploitative activities of transnational corporations, is that in most instances the directors of these corporations and their representatives in Third World countries are members of these Churches and, even by nominal association, subscribe to such statements as the above. The Church's problem therefore lies not in the need to understand, or to articulate what it understands, but rather, in the challenge to let its practice conform to its affirmation. The need to do this is crucial to world development.

3. *Disinterested Love*

It is impossible to deal with Christian practice, as distinct from practice related to any other religion or any economic philosophy, without having a clear understanding of the concept of "Disinterested Love" or love which we are enjoined to express for the neighbour *not* "because of" but in "spite of." This is called by some "neighbour-regarding" love.²

It is clear from the story of our Lord's encounter with the enquiring rich man (Luke 10: 25-37) that for Jesus, the Christian has no choice where "the neighbour" is concerned. In fact the basic thing about the relationship between "Christian" and "neighbour" is that the Christian is under obligation not so much "to have a neighbour" as "to *be* a neighbour," *regardless* of the condition of the neighbour and the response which the neighbour is likely to make to a show of neighbourliness. In our world and age this would mean for instance, that those Christians who favor parliamentary democracy and free enterprise have no justification for insisting that aid to developing countries or to needy sections of their own cities and countries be withheld from the people or countries who, for one reason or another, favour a system of government that permits only one political party and uses the process of elimination rather than elections, or one that favours state control of the major sectors of the economy in preference to private ownership.

By the same token, Christians should not hesitate to condemn the undermining of the economic development of countries which do not conform to the major ideological position of the countries of the industrialized north which are the chief sources of both investment capital and technological expertise needed in most developing countries.

"Disinterested love," the only love which is distinctively Christian, makes no demand upon the neighbour for any qualification or "extrinsic" value. It is therefore necessarily without bias in respect of race, religion, personal attitudes. Its only concern is for the enhancement of the neighbour's well-being.

Inherent in it, therefore, is the capacity to absorb hostility in recipients, to forgive ingratitude, and to understand rejection. It is completely neighbour-centered and neighbour-directed (cf. 1 Cor. 13).

4. *Worship*

Worship, an integral part of Christian existence, presupposes our acceptance of God's creatorship and sovereignty. To worship is, first of all, to acknowledge our dependence upon God, and therefore our indebtedness to God. Secondly, it is to admit our relatedness to the rest of creation, our rootedness in the rest of God's family. This we must make concrete in the local family unit, local community, and cultural milieu. Thirdly, it is to give ourselves again and again to the task, shared with God and with our brothers and sisters, of ensuring the continuous enhancement of life, not just for humanity but for all living creatures.

This kind of worship is incompatible with our condoning of the practice of injustice, the manipulation of any member or section of the human family, or the facilitation of anything that is calculated to undermine the interests or retard the development of any person or group of persons in any region. All of this is clearly implied in a number of Old Testament passages:

- a) Genesis 43: 1-10—Joseph refuses to finalise any transaction with his brothers unless they can produce their youngest brother as a sign of their sense of solidarity based on their disinterested concern for each other's well-being.
- b) Micah 6: 6-17—the prophet pronounces God's condemnation of any attempt to offer any sacrifice to God *unless* this is accompanied by a commitment to justice and mercy and humility.

The use of the worship service, therefore, only as an opportunity for experiencing inner spiritual refreshment and renewal, is tantamount to breaking the second commandment: we may not "take the name of the Lord in vain" or use it for any selfish purposes.

By the same token, efforts to change liturgies or forms of worship services should be supported and endorsed only if they are aimed at meeting the demands implied in the definition given above. Any innovations in worship that are aimed at transporting the worshipper from the reality of this world and environment, at confirming prejudices, or at enabling the worshiper to feel at ease with unfulfilled tasks and unmet obligations, should be discouraged in terms that are explicit. Worship and "responsible neighbourliness" are as inseparable as are God's grace and God's demand for indiscriminate graciousness on the part of recipients of grace.

This is why worship cannot be seen apart from concern for evangelism, and evangelism is meaningless unless it presupposes in the evangelist commitment to the securing and upholding of the human rights of those who are the objects of evangelistic activity. Those who seek to evangelise the people of Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean must be required to demonstrate their genuineness by indicating in prescribed modes their opposition to all practices (by Christians and other citizens of the countries from which they come) aimed at exploiting and inhibiting the development of the regions. Their evangelistic concern should include their commitment to the condemnation of all strategies used by government and transnational agencies in undermining efforts made by leaders of developing countries to empower their people

politically and free them from that sense of helplessness engendered by the inequities inherent in North-South trading relationships. These inequities contribute more than anything else to the continuing misdevelopment and impoverishment of those victimised regions and peoples.

Worshipping, evangelising, liberating, and empowering are concepts which belong together in the reckoning of all enlightened followers of the Man who came to "set at liberty them that are bound." To treat with them separately is tantamount to denying him.

5. *Righteousness*

Righteousness is a concept that pervades all Judeo-Christian writings. It is a basic feature of the character of God. Religious convictions about God are rooted in the conviction that history abounds with evidence of:

- a) the irrevocable nature of God's Covenant commitment (Gen. 8: 21-22; 9: 8-17).
- b) God's demand that God's people act justly in their relationship with each other (cf. Micah 6: 6-17).

The Bible is, in fact, the Book of Righteousness³ and God's righteousness and steadfast faithfulness to the covenant made with Noah, Abraham, etc., is the theme of the Bible. The very core of Old Testament ethics is that God's righteousness is to be found underneath the codes of law adopted and compiled by the Hebrew people. Needless to say, that righteousness includes mercy, loving kindness, long-suffering, and pity, to which all the prophets bear witness and to which they recall the erring people of God.

In the context of our discussions it is important to note that in the Pentateuch (Deut. 10: 16-18) there is decisive reference to the God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, mighty and awful God, who is never partial, never takes a bribe, secures justice for the orphan, the widow, and loves the resident aliens in giving them food and clothing.

In the New Testament, the ethics of which are summarised in the Sermon on the Mount, the people of God are enjoined to go beyond the justice required by law, since what they are called to do is not just to observe the law but to respond to the need which the neighbour brings to the situation or relationship.

This principle is enunciated in numerous passages containing the words "you have heard . . . but I say" (Matt. 5-7 and Luke 6 and 27). Righteousness in this sense cannot be "distributive" (where persons and groups are rewarded according to their contributions to or stake in the community) or even merely corrective. It must be redemptive, that is, aimed at restoring the neighbour to a satisfactory condition and effecting reconciliation within the human community. This could mean meeting basic needs, guaranteeing rights, and removing the factors which bedevil the relationships between international power blocks and economic and ethnic groupings in local and national communities.

Christian obedience is inconceivable without reference to our commitment to "redemptive justice" as a response to a God whose sovereignty we

acknowledge verbally and with whose redemptive activity we identify in the observance of the Sacrament of Holy Communion. The Church surrenders its right to make any demands upon unjust stewards in secular spheres, upon corrupt governments, or upon the perpetrators of “distributive justice” unless, in practice, it is firmly committed to the New Testament principle of justice based on disinterested love. This disinterested love is humanity’s response to God’s “covenanted Righteousness.”

6. *The Kingdom of God*

It is of vital importance for Christians to bear in mind always that whatever Jesus said, did, or experienced was set in the context of what he referred to as the Kingdom of God. Although he did not attempt any verbal definition of this concept, his references in parables and in the interpretations he put on miracles leave us to conclude that the concept implies the following:

- a) The eternal and visible reign of God which is independent of human bias, human response, or human knowledge.
- b) The reign of God realized in those who accept His sovereignty or take his “yoke” upon themselves (Matt. 11: 29).
- c) It is characterised by right-relationships and an atmosphere of peace (Romans 14: 17).
- d) Those who do not observe the ethics of the Kingdom invariably pay the penalty (cf. the parables of the Kingdom Matt. 24 and 25).

The nature of our Lord’s ministry leaves us in no doubt that to him the idea of the Kingdom is inseparable from the need to give hope to the poor, ensure the liberation of those who are captive in any situation and open the eyes of those whose power of discernment is impaired (cf. Luke 4: 18-19).

It is clear from the utterances of Jesus that, unlike what many Christians think, the Kingdom is *not* something to be realised in the distant future but rather that which is already present and taking shape in the here and now. (cf. Luke 10: 19; 11: 20; 17: 21).

It should not be forgotten that all that Jesus said and did in respect of the Kingdom is summarised in the prayer he gave us as the model, not only for our praying, but also for the pattern of our relationship with God and neighbour. In the Lord’s Prayer a healthy relationship with God is characterised not only by an acknowledgement of divine sovereignty, but also a petition that our physical needs be met, our relationships be just, and that we live in the belief that God will reign eternally.

Conclusion

In the light of the faith which underlies the foregoing statements there is no need for the anxieties expressed by so many Christians over the call for radical readjustments to our economic and social structures and the patterns of our relationships in both global and local situations. The call of the oppressed

for a New International Economic Order is neither unreasonable nor new. It is no more than a modern version of the call of the Hebrew prophet for obedience on the part of those who are recipients of God's mercy, and by virtue of this, are stewards of his gifts which are intended for all his children. What the rich are being called upon to relinquish is, in fact, not *their* possession but merely that which they have whether *naively* or *wilfully* withheld from their brothers and sisters for whom they are mere trustees. It is this usurpation which now scandalises their relationship with both God and neighbour.

Those who are now poor need to understand that they are not expected merely to sit and wait for the table to be set, but rather to accept responsibility to be God's agents also, for identifying, enhancing, and distributing the resources of the earth in response to the needs to the global family.

In theological perspective commitment to the development of resources for the meeting of human needs is one aspect of the continuation of the redemptive ministry of Christ. It is part of his work of liberating, humanising, and empowering. Needless to say, it is part of the process of the realisation of the Kingdom of God. In short, it means taking both God and the Gospel seriously, having acknowledged our awareness of and responsibility *to* and *for* them, respectively. And, let us not forget at any time, that this is not only a demanding obedience. It is also a privilege. It is a marvellous privilege to be here to share in the dismantling and restructuring which must take place in the process of making concrete the Kingdom about which we have preached and for which we have prayed for nearly twenty centuries.

NOTES

- 1 *The Book of Confessions*, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1967), section 9. 46.
- 2 Paul Ramsay, *Basic Christian Ethics*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970).
- 3 E. Brunner, *Justice and the Social Order*, (N.Y.: Harper's, 1945), p. 110.