The Church and Social Issues

On the Promotion of Social Righteousness: What Does the Church Have to Do with Social Issues?

Scripture

Amos 5:21–24 God demands not only right worship, but also justice and righteousness.

Luke 4:14–21 Jesus' ministry is a fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah, bringing good news to the poor, the captive, the ill, and the oppressed.

Prayer

God of wisdom, justice, and compassion, we invite your presence among us as we begin this study together, seeking to understand the church's mission to promote social righteousness and to exhibit the kingdom of heaven to the world. We know that the relationship between the church and our political and public life is sometimes contentious, O Lord, and we ask that your spirit of peace and generosity shape our conversations, giving us courage to speak the truth to one another in love. Amen.

Introduction

Christianity is lived and practiced in a context, and the church is called to respond to its context with compassion, wisdom, and a passion for justice and right relationships. About the purpose of the church, we read in the *Book of Order:* "The great ends of the church are the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind; the shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God; the maintenance of divine worship; the preservation of the truth; the promotion of social righteousness; and the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world."[1] What about the last two of the

1. *Book of Order,* Part II of *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.),* (Louisville: Office of the General Assembly, 2013), F-1.0304. Reprinted with permission of the Office of the General Assembly.

great ends: the promotion of social righteousness and the exhibition of the kingdom of heaven to the world? How is the church to go about seeking these ends?

We Presbyterians are called both to seek goodness in our social contexts and to live in a way as to demonstrate that there exists a fuller, more perfect, and flourishing goodness that guides our work in the world. In some ways, this demands we stand in two places at once: in the world as it is and in the world God imagines and creates, with our response and participation.

Standing in this place requires both vision and voice—the capacity both to see and to articulate the good and the impediments to the good. In our tradition, this is sometimes called the practice of social witness. We engage social issues as individuals, groups, congregations, and even as a denomination when we write letters to government officials, participate in protests, make choices about where we invest our money, vote for candidates or legislation, and even (perhaps most deeply) participate in our worshiping life.

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) frequently describes the practice of engaging social issues as "social witness." What is the theological and ethical significance of this practice, in our shared life together?

In this session, we will identify the challenges of engaging social issues in the church; mine some Reformed theological resources for doing so; and explore the biblical call to social witness, whereby we seek to be faithful disciples in the public sphere.

"He Is Not Political"

Recently, a well-meaning endorsement was written for a local minister. Among the many accolades lavished upon this faithful pastor was this one: "He is a very good preacher. He is not political."

Without knowing the full context, we can identify at least two possibilities: 1) that the pastor does not, in fact, raise potentially divisive or controversial issues in his sermons; or 2) that the writer holds a relatively narrow interpretation of what it means to be "political." In either case, it was the writer's estimation that avoiding the political is central to being a "good preacher." We might extrapolate from this and ask, "Can good Christians faithfully engage social issues, particularly when there is a strong political and economic dimension to them?"

The relationship between Christian faith and the political realm makes some of us a little nervous. Why? Presbyterians and other Reformed Christians might identify any number of reasons why

this is so, including but not limited to: concerns about prohibitions against certain kinds of political activity by congregations that have tax-exempt status; fear of polarizing the faith community over a contentious issue; appropriate modesty in assuming theological support for political positions; and the assumption that the church is the place for spiritual, not political, matters.

The last one is a particularly thorny problem. Most congregations would affirm the need to perform acts of charity and compassion with those who are sick and suffering. But as Martin Luther King Jr. said, "True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar; it understands that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring."[2] King argued that the gospel message is not only about charity, but also about justice.

The problem: to move from charity to justice requires a foray into the political, economic, and social realms of a society. This is where people get a little uncomfortable, and their discomfort has roots in the history of Reformed traditions even here, in the United States. In fact, the idea that the church is meant to remain in the "spiritual" realm was the organizing principle for the 1861 General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States. In the "Southern Address," the newly formed body (renamed the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America) laid out its ecclesiology, in relation to church statements on social issues—in this case, secession and slavery: "The provinces of Church and State are perfectly distinct . . . . The State aims at social order, the Church at spiritual holiness . . . . We say nothing here as to the righteousness or unrighteousness of these decrees. What we maintain is, that, whether right or wrong, the Church has no right to make them—she transcended her sphere, and usurped the duties of the State."[3]

The problem: to move from charity to justice requires a foray into the political, economic, and social realms of a society.

While a church's unwillingness to condemn slavery may seem impossible to us today, the "distinction of the spheres" argument is still quite prevalent, if implicit.

2. Martin Luther King Jr., *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1967), 187–8.
3. "Address of the Southern General Assembly to All the Churches of Jesus Christ, Adopted 1861," quoted in Robert Ellis Thompson, A History of the Presbyterian Churches in the United States (New York: The Christian Literature Company, 1895), 391–2, 394.

Calvin, Reformed Confessions, and the Public Sphere

Christians in Reformed traditions, however, can draw on broader and more complex perspectives on the relationship of the church to social issues, challenging statements like the "Southern Address" in its aversion to the political, economic, and social implications of Christian faith! In many places, times, and contexts, Presbyterians and other Reformed Christians have engaged social issues with depth, courage, and faithfulness. We can even begin with John Calvin (1509–1564) himself.

In many places, times, and contexts, Presbyterians and other Reformed Christians have engaged social issues with depth, courage, and faithfulness.

Calvin began his vocational journey in the legal profession. His theology, too, reflects a deep concern about the relationship of the church to the political sphere, including this question: How should we relate to our political officials? Calvin prefaced his classic, *Institutes of Christian Religion,* with a letter to King Francis I of France that, among other purposes, defends the role of the church to correct "public error."[4] The Reformers were being persecuted for what Christians are called to do—challenging the status quo and seeking to remedy what they discerned to be social evil, in accordance with revealed divine truth.

An understanding of the church's responsibility to address social problems has persisted through many twists and turns in the development of the Reformed tradition, and is evidenced even now in contemporary statements such as the Confession of 1967 and the Confession of Belhar. In a background paper on the denomination's social voice, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) affirmed the church's "responsibility to witness to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in every dimension of life. That has led Presbyterian General Assemblies and their spokespersons, from the beginning, to address moral injunctions to public officials, even as John Calvin and John Knox and John Witherspoon did."[5] What do we make of the church's call to act in our own time?

Presbyterians can find many examples in our shared life and in Reformed confessions that make clear the Christian's responsibility

4. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion,* ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 23.
5. *Why and How the Church Makes a Social Policy Witness* (Louisville, KY: 205th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church [U.S.A.], 1993), v.

to engage social issues. In the Theological Declaration of Barmen (written in the context of Nazi Germany), we are reminded that the church is sometimes called into a "confessional moment," in which we must speak a definitive "yes" in response to God's love and justice, and a definitive "no" in response to repression and political demands for unquestioning loyalty.

In the Confession of 1967, we are reminded that the gospel message with which Christians are entrusted, summarized in 2 Corinthians 5:16–21, is the message of reconciliation, which we are called to embody in our personal, social, and political relationships.

The Confession of Belhar from South Africa, written during apartheid, challenges us to respond faithfully to the gift *and obligation* of unity, reconciliation, and justice.

These confessional statements, among many others, illustrate the deep commitment across many Reformed traditions, to engaging social and political issues.

The Call to Social Witness

What does it mean to describe the church's practice when it engages social issues, as "social witness"?

In the New Testament, believers are called to the work of *martureō*, which means, literally, to bear witness with regard to the truth.[6] Especially in the Gospels, we find repeated commands to the earliest followers of Jesus that they "bear witness" to what they had seen and come to know through their relationship with Jesus. What does the practice of social witness look like for Presbyterians, today?

The PC(USA) General Assembly has identified social witness as "an expression of the gospel . . . . The church is commissioned to bear witness to the God we know in Christ who judges, forgives, and transforms the world. It is a world of power and structures, of processes and relationships, of individual persons and communities, of human and natural environments. This is the world God loves deeply, and empowers Christians to engage responsibly."[7]

Social witness is demanded and defined by God's alternative vision of community that is grounded in the theological conceptions of hope, justice, and peace.

6. Walter Bauer, "μαρτυρεω," in *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature,* ed. F. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker, trans. William Arndt, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 492–3.
7. *Why and How the Church Makes a Social Policy Witness,* 18.

Social witness is demanded and defined by God's alternative vision of community that is grounded in the theological conceptions of hope, justice, and peace. Christian discipleship is the lifelong process of asking, "What is God inviting us to see, in this situation? And how is God inviting us to engage and speak about these matters?"

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann challenges us to develop a "prophetic imagination," by which Christians expose the "deathliness" of dominant culture *and* imagine new forms of community.[8] As an exercise in prophetic imagination, social witness requires vision to see clearly and voice to articulate the good and impediments to the good. We need two kinds of testimony: naming the sin, suffering, and evil that we see in the world and affirming our commitment to participate in God's work for flourishing in the world.

Social witness also requires hearts tender and open enough to experience pain, anger, passion, and compassion. Brueggemann describes the work of prophetic ministry as nurturing an alternative consciousness that both *criticizes* dominant structures (grieving that "things are not right") and *energizes* people and communities with the promise of new life. Prophetic imagination, and thus social witness, requires both sharpened skills in thoughtful and critical social and political analysis, as well as hope for the future. It requires realistic appraisals of sin in the world and in ourselves, and at the same time requires deep trust and anticipation that God is active in our world, bringing about goodness, peace, and flourishing.

Spiritual Practice

Individual Activity: This week, choose one confession from the *Book of Confessions* and read portions of it each day, asking, "What does this document have to say about the church's responsibility in relationship to social issues?"

Group Activity: Share with one another the social and political situations that could cause you to despair, and the social and political situations that energize you.

8. Walter Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination,* 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 115–16.

Questions for Reflection

Does the idea of the church's engagement in social and political issues excite you? Make you nervous? Where are the points of contention in this aspect of the church's ministry?

When was a time in your life in which you felt called to be a witness—with vision and voice—to the good and to impediments to the good? What was your response?