

Seeking Social Justice

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A Christian Challenge to Current Social and Economic Problems

Scripture

Isaiah 65:17a, 19b–23 God’s vision of a new heaven and a new earth where no child will be born for calamity and no one will labor in vain.

Prayer

Great Wisdom, heighten our awareness of attitudes and practices that deceive us into thinking we are so different from others. Focus our attention on our common nature and needs. Clear our eyes to see the value in all forms of work: from manager to worker, server to cook, doctor to janitor, mother or father at home to mother or father as breadwinner. Stir within us a longing for a world where weeping will no longer be heard and the basic needs of all will be satisfied. May we find the voice to proclaim with the prophets your vision for a new earth. Amen.

Introduction

Do we Christians really know how to respond to the call of the prophets in our own time? Isaiah’s words are clear in their ancient context. As Israel grew in prosperity, the prophets reminded people of faith of their covenant with God so they would not forget the God who provided for their greatest needs and acted to free them from the bondage of the empires that had held them captive. Is the message of prophets like Isaiah also relevant today? Are there places where people continue to be held in bondage by others? Would our world look different if we were to think of the prophets’ imagination and vision for justice as directly related to our own social, economic, and political lives?

If we look at the Social Creed for the 21st Century as a way to honor the church’s important prophetic tradition, we can only offer a resounding *yes* to these questions. The creed makes us aware of many places where people are held in bondage today. It points toward practices and policies that bear the potential to bring God’s vision for a new earth into conversations about social and economic justice.

The Social Creed for the 21st Century celebrates the centennial of the 1908 Social Creed and was adopted by both the PC(USA) and the National Council of Churches in 2008. A creed is one of the ways Reformed and Presbyterian Christians promote social righteousness as one of the Great Ends of the Church. Like the 1908 creed, this creed calls for Christians to work collaboratively and ecumenically in response to the great challenges of globalization and sustainability.

To begin, carefully read the twenty-first-century creed. Take a moment to reflect on the relevance of Isaiah's words for the social and economic problems we face in our own time. The first session invites you to begin exploring, just grazing the surface of the social, economic, and political problems named in the creed. We will consider the theological basis the creed provides for a contemporary Christian response to problems we face today.

Cries of Distress: Living in States of Economic and Social Vulnerability in the United States

The Social Creed for the 21st Century begins by focusing on economic, social, and political problems of the United States before moving to the larger global community. Nearly all Christians in the United States have become more aware of their own economic vulnerabilities because of the economic downturn at the beginning of the century. Not all, however, have had the experience of living in a perpetual state of social and economic vulnerability and witnessing the instability created for individuals or within families, due to being paid extremely low wages or working in jobs that do not offer adequate pension and health-care plans.

Consider these facts:

- Of all the industrialized countries, the United States has the highest overall poverty rate and the highest child poverty rate. The National Center for Children in Poverty reports that about 14 million children in the United States are living in poverty. In addition, poverty disproportionately affects black and Latino families: 34 percent of black children and 29 percent of Latino children live in poverty, whereas 13 percent of Asian children and 10 percent of white children do.
- About one-fourth of the workforce (about 30 million people) works in low-wage jobs. The percentage of low-wage earners among African American and Hispanic people is far higher than their overall representation in the workforce.

- Despite some advances, women in the United States have yet to achieve full equality. Women continue to bear a greater burden of poverty and earn seventy-six cents on the dollar when compared with men in similar occupations. Women are underrepresented in the political realm; about 14 percent of U.S. senators are women.
- Some strides have recently been made with regard to health care. However, the United States ranks forty-second in life expectancy when compared with other nations in the international community.
- The United States may have laws favoring an eight-hour work day, but employees in our nation work the most of any in all the industrialized nations.
- A Pew Report from 2008 stated that one in one hundred adults in the United States was in prison. Minority groups had particularly high incarceration rates. State governments were spending \$50 billion a year on corrections, and the federal government was spending about \$5 billion.

These statistics challenge us to investigate the root causes of the social and economic disparities that are so evident in our society. The Social Creed for the 21st Century underscores the experiences of those who are underpaid or underemployed, who lack adequate health care and access to needed resources on all levels of society.

The creed calls for “full civil, political and economic rights for women and men of all races[;] abolition of forced labor, human trafficking, and the exploitation of children[;] employment for all, at a family-sustaining living wage . . . and rights of workers to organize.” These set an important vision before us.

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Connecting Jesus and the Prophets

For some Christians, statistical data alone will not provide a strong enough basis to argue that our existing social, economic, and political systems need fixing. Some will say statistical data can be interpreted in many different ways. They will say we could also consider the circumstances in which we are living in light of the

progress we have made—view the glass as half full, rather than half empty. Perspective, however, determines much. Our concerns about the disparities and inequalities highlighted above are not just social; Christian thought and practice offer a strong theological basis for our social concern.

You may have noticed that the Social Creed for the 21st Century has an explicitly theological framework. Isaiah’s vision for the peaceable kingdom is connected to a call found in Gospel texts that disciples of Jesus Christ stand in solidarity with those pushed to the margins of society so all “may have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10). Jesus’ own ministry is clearly seen here to be in line with the prophets.

Walter Rauschenbusch, a social gospel theologian, is remembered for making the connection between Jesus and the prophets. More will be said in the next session about the connection between the twenty-first-century creed and the 1908 creed. But it is important to observe that our contemporary creed is intended to emphasize the continued relevance of the social gospel. The social gospel movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries established a broad and ecumenical coalition of committed Protestants who collaborated to address the circumstances of the working poor. Rauschenbusch wrote two key books that helped articulate a theological framework for the movement: *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (1907) and *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (1917). Contemporary theologians and church leaders today pay attention to Rauschenbusch’s writings and the way he connected his faith to social concern along with his understanding of Jesus’ own prophetic ministry.

Rauschenbusch focused on the personality and character of Jesus and emphasized the way Jesus himself had learned from the prophets. The prophets challenged the individualism of both religion and society. Rauschenbusch believed Jesus had an interest in national and social life and acted in ways that showed the connection between faith and justice. Think about stories of Jesus sitting at table with tax collectors, sinners, and women and breaking boundaries defined by race, class, and ethnicity. Jesus was able to do what others had not done; he became fully conscious of the unity of all humanity and lived with compassion for others. Jesus spoke to his own age about concrete conditions and responded to the stirrings of the life that

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surged about him. Rauschenbusch identified Jesus' sympathies with the poor and oppressed. Jesus had a revolutionary consciousness that eliminated distinctions of social rank and economic status and introduced a kingdom of equality on earth. Jesus became a religious initiator of social reform whose central mission was to announce the coming of God's kingdom or, to use the language found in Isaiah, a "new earth" (Isaiah 65:17).

A Challenge for All Jesus' Followers

We may be wondering how the social gospel fits with Reformed thought and practice. The connection Rauschenbusch made between Jesus and the prophets can be clearly found in Reformed thought.

In Reformed thought, God above all else is worthy of our devotion; therefore, we must be conscious of and confront ways in which our practices run counter to God's vision for the world. Jesus' life was a life lived-for-others. Jesus' life lived-for-others

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was a sign of his own integrity, authenticity, and response to the God of Israel. The challenge Rauschenbusch presented through his understanding of Jesus is a challenge for all Jesus' followers. Responding with integrity and authenticity, however, is not an easy task. Our responses require understanding the needs of others around us, entering into the experience of others, and looking beyond our own limited visions for the world.

There are many examples of people who have taken up this challenge. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Presbyterian Donaldina Cameron chose to live for others as she rescued Chinese immigrant women who had been sold into sex slavery. Laws at the time prevented Chinese men from marrying women outside their own ethnic group. Many of the men had come to California to work on the railroad and settle the West. The laws and growing number of Chinese immigrants created a large market for Chinese women. Cameron is legendary among Presbyterians in California. She not only accompanied police officers on their raids of brothels in San Francisco, she also created Cameron House, which helped assimilate women after they were rescued from the sex-slave trade. Cameron advocated for the women through her rescue work,

by creating educational and training programs specifically focused on the needs of women who were rescued from the sex-slave trade, and by going with them to the U.S. court system to secure their futures as U.S. citizens. Cameron House still exists today, addressing the needs of the Chinese-American community in San Francisco. Many of the women began to call her *Lo Mo*, which in Chinese means “old mother.” Cameron’s life was lived-for-others as she challenged the attitudes toward immigrants that dominated her society.

The Social Creed for the 21st Century is intended to begin a conversation about finding a sense of moral coherence in difficult times and to consider how we can live with authenticity and integrity as we pursue the common good. We will grapple with much more in the five sessions that follow.

Spiritual Practice

Enter into prayer for examining your conscience and consciousness. Reflect on events of the last forty-eight hours. On a sheet of paper, list places where you have seen people in distress and separately list times when you have seen glimpses of a new earth.

Questions for Reflection

What are some of the destructive patterns and behaviors named by the Social Creed for the 21st Century? Where do you see evidence that these destructive patterns and behaviors are threatening the health of your community? Where do you see churches addressing these destructive patterns?

Walter Rauschenbusch connected Jesus with the prophets. What are some of the Gospel stories that highlight Jesus’ sympathies with the poor and oppressed?

What challenges do you personally face when you consider ways that you can work for peace and justice?