



CHRISTIAN SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

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God's Word addresses each individual in the context of the social relationships and social institutions within which that person lives. An individual's response to that Word is therefore relevant to these relationships and institutions. Christian faith cannot be separated from Christian social responsibility.

I. THEOLOGICAL BASIS FOR CHRISTIAN SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

1. Law and Gospel

Christian social responsibility is undertaken in response to the Word of God, both law and gospel. Christians understand themselves as living simultaneously under the law and the gospel. Through God's grace offered in the gospel one is freed from the law's condemnation and made a saint; yet, as a sinner one remains subject to the law.

This self-understanding as saint and sinner has implications for the Christian's involvement with social problems. While believers exercise their citizenship as forgiven sinners, they realize that society cannot be governed by the gospel. The law, however, is universally relevant to Christians and non-Christians, restraining the self-destructive power of sin and preserving the world in a semblance of order until the Day of Jesus Christ. Since all persons are endowed with reason and are capable of civil righteousness, Christians and non-Christians can cooperate widely in the ordering of social life, and in the solution of social problems. Moreover, Christians understand their part in this effort to be part of their Christian vocation.

The gospel serves to prevent the absolutizing of any efforts at social construction. Even while participating seriously and earnestly in the attempt to bring about a better and more just society, Christians also know from the gospel that there are no ultimate solutions short of the kingdom of God and that ". . . the Kingdom of God comes of itself, without our prayer. . . ." This liberates Christians for participation in the social order and for a genuine concern for civil righteousness, without the necessity of having to make such righteousness the basis of one's salvation.

2. Faith and Works

An evangelical perspective avoids both legalism and libertinism. Salvation depends upon God's grace, received by faith. But faith inevitably expresses itself in works of love. Justified by grace through faith, the believer is freed to do works of love. Freed from condemnation in the sight of God, one is enabled to direct one's energies in works of love toward the neighbor.

3. Two Kingdoms

Because God is active both as creator and redeemer, and his love is manifested through both law and gospel, Lutherans speak of two forms of God's rule. Through law and gospel God rules all persons, all of whom are his creatures but some of whom are his saints. Christians live "between the times" in both kingdoms, in the "now" of the fallen creation ruled by the law, and in the "not yet" of the kingdom of God through faith in the gospel.

This Lutheran understanding of the two kingdoms underscores both social realism and social responsibility. It underscores social realism with its reminder that no social order can ever be identified with the kingdom of God; Christian love will always need to adjust itself to conditions of a fallen world. But it underscores social responsibility with its reminder that the "left-hand" kingdom, the secular realm, is also God's kingdom; the Christian believer acts in the world as a willing tool of God's preserving and saving purposes.

Care must be taken to distinguish, but not to separate, the kingdom of God from the "kingdom of the world." "Christian" answers cannot be imposed upon the secular realm, nor can any program or strategy be identified with the kingdom of God. Nevertheless, a knowledge of God's righteousness and love should inform and give perspective to the Christian's participation in the secular realm where one's vocation is lived; this is the arena where Christian faith becomes active in love, and where love is engaged in the search for justice.

4. Grace and Reason

Salvation depends solely upon God's grace, revealed in Jesus Christ. While reason cannot fathom this grace, it is nevertheless the faculty with which God has endowed persons for ordering their life in this world. The *Augsburg Confession* asserts that every person "possesses some measure of freedom of the will which enables him to live an outwardly honorable life and to make choices among the things that reason comprehends" (Art. XVIII). A responsible exercise of reason requires that Christians seek honestly and courageously to understand the complexities of the issues with which they deal, searching for the most reliable information upon which to base their decisions.

B. RESPONSIBILITY OF THE CHRISTIAN INDIVIDUAL

1. Christians understand the temporal realm as God's creation, where a fallen world is preserved by God's sustaining care. Therefore, they do not withdraw from the world but strive to serve as agents of God's purpose within the world. They serve God's cause of social justice through their secular offices as citizen, family members, workers, and community members.

2. Christians living in a democracy are inescapably involved in the political process. Actively or passively they participate through the processes of politics to help shape the laws and structures of society. Service in the public sphere is a channel through which Christians express a part of their call from God.

3. Effective participation by Christians in the political processes requires active participation in political parties and/or civic action groups. Here Christians can influence the selection of candidates, support candidates and officeholders, define issues, propose goals for public policy, develop programs of governmental action, and foster informed voting. The basic work of politics begins with dedicated activity at the precinct or neighborhood level.

4. The history of American society suggests that many civic achievements are brought about through voluntary associations of persons. Working through community organizations, youth clubs, special interest groups, service clubs, and similar organizations, people are able to promote the common welfare and build a sense of community.

5. Conflicts of various kinds, within and between parties and groups, are inevitable in the public arena. Such conflicts should be considered desirable, since it is through the interaction of competing claims and the struggles of various interest groups that the abuses of power are most likely to be checked and the cause of justice furthered. Effective checks and balances on the use of power require strong groups, able to offer criticism and alternatives.

6. Compromise is an inevitable part of the give and take of political or other social participation. Compromise involves the process of achieving a meeting of the minds, an acceptable consensus, a workable reconciliation of conflict or of diverse views. Such compromise moves toward wholesome, mutually desired goals. It accepts the possible as a step toward the desirable. Seen in this light, compromise can be an expression of respect for persons and community. It may require one to yield some self-centered advantage for the sake of others and the good of the community.

7. Outwardly the social and political involvement of Christians differs little from that of their non-Christian neighbors. Indeed, the two can and must work closely together for human justice. The practice of politics has no uniquely Christian properties. Christians in political activity differ, however, in the spiritual resources available to them, their motivations to service, their reasons for the goals to which they commit themselves, their understanding of human failure, and their experience of the reality of grace and forgiveness.

C. RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE PASTOR

1. The office of pastor is only *functionally* different from the responsibility of any other Christian; it exists for the sake of good order in the household of faith. While the congregation, as the people of God, is called to be servant, priest, and prophet in the community, the pastor has a special leadership role in these expressions of mission. Traditionally, the central functions of the pastor have been preaching, administering the sacraments, teaching, and counseling.

2. The pastor should be as free to participate in community activities as any lay Christian or any other citizen. It is proper and desirable for pastors to take an informed and active part in civic affairs, including participation in civic organizations, political activity, community organization, and movements to change the course of public policy. While the pastor needs to remain sensitive to the impact of such participation on the effectiveness of pastoral functions, no false dichotomy between religion and civil affairs should limit this participation.

3. In the course of a pastor's normal ministry to members of the congregation and others in the community, he or she may expect to influence the course of

civic affairs. A faithful proclamation of law and gospel through preaching, administration of the sacraments, teaching and counseling indeed nurtures, motivates, and instructs the sense of social responsibility on the part of those with whom the pastor interacts. A ministry of listening to those actively engaged with civic responsibilities is frequently a creative aspect of the pastor's function.

4. Since the pastor uniquely represents the *public witness* of the church, there may be times and circumstances when the pastor's active participation in civic affairs gives pointed testimony to the Christian concern about the perpetuation of injustice and the need for change. In exercising the prophetic function of ministry, the pastor points to the disparity between God's intention for his creation and contemporary forms of injustice. Avoiding all attempts to "Christianize" society, the pastor as public representative of the church may prophetically criticize those aspects of contemporary society which are dehumanizing, and may assist in helping to alleviate them.

5. A pastor is entitled to the same rights and is responsible for the same duties as any other citizen. State laws, nevertheless, usually exempt a pastor from jury duty and may respect privileged communication due to the nature of the clergy profession. Beyond this, any special privileges should not be expected from the community because of one's status as a pastor. The office of pastor bestows no special competence on public issues or matters of public policy; a pastor participates in civic life on the same basis as any other citizen.

D. OUR CORPORATE RESPONSIBILITY

1. The corporate responsibility of the church in the civic realm has many aspects, ranging from indirect to direct involvement. The ministry and fellowship of the church provides persons' lives with the kind of meaning which propels them toward service to the neighbor. Christian instruction fosters a commitment to values which serve the common good. The church can help to inspire and shape political virtues and public ideals. Church members can form voluntary organizations to address specific needs. At certain times the church may advocate particular social reforms.

2. The corporate church needs to correct false divisions often made between sacred and secular, spiritual and earthly. The church and its members inescapably are involved in politics. Doing nothing really serves to support the *status quo*. Politics is the process by which people exercise God's grant of his authority to foster whatever is good and to curb whatever is evil in society. The influence of the church and its members needs always to be a witness for honesty, integrity, justice, truth, wholeness in the community, and the other ingredients basic to a sound society.

3. The corporate church equips its members for mission. It assists, strengthens, and upholds them in their ministry. Through its teaching, pastoral, and fellowship roles it prepares its members to take their places wisely and responsibly in their various offices in society. Toward this end the corporate church, at its various levels of organization, structures itself to:

a. study and analyze issues causing tension and values in conflict in society;

b. evaluate the effects of current trends upon persons, and upon the ability of the various institutions and structures of society effectively to fulfill their special functions within the community;

c. seek to bring a biblical and theological perspective to bear upon contemporary issues and trends in human society;

d. clarify the goals and objectives for persons and community, as well as the values and criteria by which to judge the wisdom and wholesomeness of measures for civic righteousness;

e. resist every effort which would make the church captive to a particular class, political, economic, racial, national, or ideological interest, keeping itself free to proclaim that counsel and bear that witness which it believes its Lord expects of his church.

4. The church as a fellowship of believers is concerned to meet human needs through deeds of love and justice. It does this through acts of direct service to persons, both through the congregation and its resources and through its social service agencies. And it does this through efforts to change the social structures in which persons are hurt and debased.

Other avenues of direct involvement in the struggle for justice and the solution of social problems include:

a. advocacy on behalf of the poor, the weak, the disenfranchised, and others least able to defend their own rights;

b. helping to formulate and support sound goals of public policy relating to justice and a responsive society;

c. joining in cooperative ventures and supporting programs of community action directed toward the overcoming of poverty, hunger, family breakdown, racism, crime, and other forms of injustice;

d. using corporate purchasing power and investment funds to support enterprises and activities which advance the cause of social justice.

5. Every act of the corporate church is a witness, whether it is addressing its own members or those outside its membership. In a complex society, any corporate witness in the civic realm demands thorough study and analysis of the issues. The church also realizes that its witness cannot and ought not be imposed upon those who dissent. While a public witness is an inescapable part of the church's ministry, this witness must be made in the context of conversation, persuasion, reciprocal correction, and mutual encouragement.

6. The corporate church seeks within its own fellowship to be an exemplary community. Confessing its sinfulness, the church relies upon God's forgiveness offered in the gospel. It seeks healing and reconciliation among its own members, and strives to reach out in love and justice toward those outside its fellowship.

E. WITNESS THROUGH WORD AND DEED

By word and deed both laity and pastors, individually and corporately, exercise their Christian social responsibility. Through involvement in the structures of society, they bear witness to their faith which is active in love, and to their love which searches for justice. Their vision is that of a world made new for a life of social justice and mercy, of reconciliation and peace, of promise and fulfillment. They strive to be God's agents, so that these social systems and structures may become more responsive to God's will for the world.



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