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Toward a Christian Theology of Church and Society as it Relates to Restorative Justice.

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Those of us living in this particular fin-de-siècle may well find the whole idea that church and society are somehow intertwined a bit thin. Granted that there is something like a billion Christians on earth, but the role of the church in most countries has been shrinking rather than expanding. Islam is experiencing a growth and resurgence which pushes the Masjid to the fore- front of societies where the crescent is in the ascendancy. Afghanistan is the latest country to have its political leadership identify itself with conservative Islam.

Traditionally Christian countries, such as the United States and Canada for the last hundred years or so, have seen the opposite. First in Europe, and now in North America, society at large has separated itself from the church, or any other religious organization. Christians have become just another voting block to be wooed by politicians.

This is a change which most Christians have not seemed very concerned about, unless a pet political issue is involved. In 18th and 19th century America the church was a powerful force in society. The sermon had implications for how the town was run. Political leaders knew that preachers and their congregations had particular needs which must be attended to, and society at large was impacted.

This century has seen that situation change. Urbanization, population growth, immigration, and growing pluralism have pushed the church from its position of power and leadership. Modern preachers, even the famous ones, preach to too few people to have much impact on the larger society. The change from town to city has seen to that. In the US and Canada, the church is not in charge, and scarcely makes a proper voting block.

In the arena of single issue politics, church people have been successful in making their views known, but one wonders how many minds have been changed by the process, and whether the church's position in society has been enhanced, or diminished.

The church must adjust to these changes. It won't do to ignore the vast differences between 19th century and almost 21st century America. What is the role of the church in modern society, and is there any theological basis for that role?

I believe the church has at least three roles to play in North American society. They are:

1. Witness to God's love and power.
2. Call society to peace, justice and compassion.
3. Work toward the welfare of all members of society.

Let me lift up each one of these roles to look at its theological base.

1. Witness to God's Love and Power

You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.
Acts 1:8

(Setting aside modern critical issues) These were Jesus' last orders to his disciples before he left the earth. This group of disciples was the beginning of the church. They weren't ordered to build buildings, sing hymns, or do any of those other things people expect of Christians. They were ordered to be witnesses, to tell people what they had seen and experienced in their time with Jesus. They weren't ordered to pass on particular doctrine, but to simply witness to what they had seen. In Jewish law a thing could only be proved by the testimony of two or three witnesses. God had come to be with humankind, and the proof was to be given by these witnesses.

In the ensuing 2,000 years the church has developed quite a bit of doctrine, lots of traditions, and has experienced what it is to be a political power. The church has also changed from being a substantially homogeneous body to being quite diverse. It isn't realistic, these days, to say what the church thinks. It is hard enough to figure out what a single congregation thinks. The focus of Christian activity has moved away from a simple witness to what has been seen and experienced to an elaboration of doctrine and tradition. It is not really expected in most church circles, especially in North America, that most members will have an experience of God to witness to. What they will have is an intellectual understanding of facts about God as refined and approved by their church.

To be fair, there are churches which do continue to expect personal encounters with God and continuing witness to those encounters. This group is growing, but is still a small minority of Christians, many being marginalized in their societies.

By changing the focus from witness to the teaching of doctrine and traditions, the church has become more like a tribe and less like a spirit-led community of witnesses. This is a natural process of change, but is not necessarily a good one. One reason for the change is the identification of the church with the society in which it lives.

Christians started out as a sect within Judaism, but that fell apart rapidly, leaving the church as an illegal pagan cult. That status continued for 250 years or so. During this illegal period, the church was not confronted with the need to purify society, or do anything else to control society. It was quite enough to survive. The church was a small group within a much larger society which was hostile to the church. It was appropriate for Christians to do whatever they thought important to purify themselves, and maintain their identity over against society. Faithfulness to God was demonstrated by the way a Christian separated him or her self from the pagan ways surrounding them.

Christians did not participate in government or any significant civic responsibilities because they were pagans, from the viewpoint of the larger society, disqualified from civic responsibility. It would never have occurred to those early Christians to tell the surrounding society what to do, or even to make any public proclamations about how a person should live. Their interest was to save people from the world by separating them from it. The Apostle Paul gives quite a few suggestions for how to live in the world without being seduced by it. Oddly enough, that is still a theme of Christian teaching today, at least in some circles.

When the Emperor Constantine became Christian, baptizing his army by marching them through a river while holding their sword arm out of the water to keep it available to the emperor by some accounts, the role of the church suddenly changed. Now it became a powerful political force in society. There was great pressure for it to accommodate to the needs of society, as perceived by the emperor. Over the centuries that need has had its effect, notwithstanding the many reforms and restoration movements. Those of you who know the story of St. Francis of Assisi will remember that his vision was of Christ saying "rebuild my church, which is in ruins." This was around 1203. Three hundred years later the Reformation made larger changes in the church.

Some have referred to the conversion of Constantine as the Fall of The Church. This is because of the not unexpected results of political preferment: accommodation to the views of the one granting privileges. The problem is similar to the argument

surrounding political campaign finances. One cannot behave the same toward a stranger, and a person giving you money. The one who pays the piper calls the tune. We all know how this dynamic works in modern political life, yet many find it hard to see the same thing at work when the church is given political power.

If the role of the church is to witness to the society around it, it must have a certain critical distance from that society. Without this distance it is very difficult to discern where the practices of society diverge from the church's understanding of God's desires for the world. The church can become confused, seeing in human actions the plan of God, when those actions are not consistent with the Bible.

Another way of seeing the same problem comes in the difference between exegesis and eisegesis. In exegesis one reads a text and draws meaning from the text. In eisegesis one reads a predetermined meaning into the text. Biblical interpretation is an area in which people claim to do an exegesis, drawing the meaning from the text. The problem is that biblical interpretation is sometimes done by simply inserting a predetermined meaning into a text. If you already know the answer you want, it is not difficult to find biblical texts which support it.

My wife is a graduate of Bethel College, a Mennonite school in Kansas. One of the Bible verses often quoted by Bethel students is Amos 4:4 "Go to Bethel and sin." Exegesis results in a very different interpretation from eisegesis in this case.

The extent to which a particular Christian group concerns itself with separating from society, as opposed to living in society, makes a big difference in how it perceives its role as witness. Catholics, Lutherans, Reformed and Episcopalians don't hear many sermons on how to separate yourself from the surrounding society. The assumption in those groups is that all are active members of society, and have a good effect on society by their participation. For people with this view, witness means living a "good" life, which generally means being honest, friendly, and compassionate in your personal and business dealings.

These groups which have a history of being tied to the ruling authorities at different times and places have also needed to develop the view that what a person does in his or her official capacity does not need to meet the more stringent description of what a "good" Christian does. Luther was quite clear on this dual role of a citizen, who might need to forgive a person who wronged them individually, while carrying out the execution of that same person in the role of magistrate. After all, if everyone in the kingdom is Christian, there has to be some way to get done those things which don't look or sound particularly Christian. The Old Testament was generally looked to for guidance on those activities which Jesus didn't talk about, like the proper role for

Christian magistrates. Would Jesus, for instance, execute by hanging, or lethal injection? A Christian executioner would wind up needing to ponder that point.

This distinction between public and private roles of a Christian continues today. When we gather to discuss the role of the church and legislation in defining restorative justice, we need to recognize the basic difference between the views of those who belong to churches which have been part of the power structure, and those who don't.

The Anabaptists, those reformation radicals who arose at the same time as Luther, and Calvin, refused to acknowledge a dual role for Christians in society. They said that a Christian magistrate would have to follow the same ethical rules at home and at the office. This being practically impossible, it wasn't appropriate for Christians to be magistrates. The Anabaptist view of witness to the love and power of God meant conforming oneself to the teachings and example of Jesus. Where Jesus was silent on a subject, like how to be a Christian magistrate, it was best not to be involved with it. When in doubt about the godliness of an activity, give the benefit of the doubt to God.

To those who descended from these Anabaptists, mostly Mennonites, Amish and their related groups, a Christian witnessed to the surrounding society by separating him or herself from any behaviors or activities of which Jesus, as disclosed in the New Testament, would not approve. When confronted with a novel situation, an Anabaptist would ask: "what would Jesus do?" If there was no useful New Testament guidance, it was best to avoid the new thing, whatever it was. Anabaptist interpretation of the Bible and application of it to new situations was the province of the congregation, as opposed to the priesthood.

As time passed, Mennonites responded to changes in society just like everyone else. In Holland Mennonites became first tolerated, then rich and powerful as merchants in the 18th century. Not surprisingly, rich, powerful merchants found that being part of the power structure of society inclined a person to do things which were not consistent with the idea of looking to Jesus for guidance. These Mennonites slowly adopted the more Lutheran view of separating private and public life. In one Mennonite church I visited in Holland there is a large ship model. It's a man o'war which was purchased and operated by merchants of that church to protect their ships from pirates. The difference between these Mennonites and the Mennonites who went to America to farm in peace is striking.

American Mennonites of that same time did not participate in government, didn't vote, and held no civic offices. This separation was assisted by their speaking German instead of English. The object was to purify oneself by separating from the worldly society around you. This worked best if there was a large community of like-minded

persons, and worked poorly for isolated families. These Mennonites witnessed to the world by separating from it, thereby calling its practices into question.

The church has a role in society of witnessing to the power and love of God. But how does that witness manifest itself these days? How should it manifest itself? One way is for it to

2. Call society to peace, justice and compassion.

God looked for justice, but saw bloodshed; for righteousness but heard cries of distress. . . Woe to you who add house to house and field to field till no space is left and you live alone in the land . . . who acquit the guilty for a bribe but deny justice to the innocent . . . But the Lord Almighty will be exalted by his justice and the holy God will show himself holy by his righteousness. Isaiah 5

Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. Luke 6:20b-21.

Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. Luke 6:27-28.

These are prophetic words, words which compare what society is doing with eternal principles of peace, justice and compassion. The church has a prophetic role in its society. Human versions of truth come and go. They tend to be based on what works, what is popular, or on a reaction to something else that didn't work.

When we talk of witnessing, as I have been doing, the hope is that others who have not had an experience of God will be encouraged to be open to such a thing for themselves, or even to desire it. The church, by its witness shows itself to the world and proclaims itself a player on the world stage. It is an invitation for others to share the experience.

When I speak of the church's prophetic voice, I am referring to a call to action. The church is challenging the world to live up to its potential instead of to its least common denominator. The gist of the message is that the church has received wisdom which allows it to evaluate the world's way of doing things, and sees room for improvement. The world's best thinking, after all is what has gotten it into the present mess. The world has need of the wisdom which the church possesses.

I don't need to tell you that this idea is controversial from time to time in places. Wherever there has been oppression and the church has spoken out, there have been

those who said the church was out of line to be so political. It brings to mind the story of a church group which lived at the bottom of a treacherous mountain road. There were many accidents and injuries on that road, so the church decided to start an ambulance service. Praise was heaped on the church's work as it brought the broken victims to the hospital. Then one day someone in the church asked, "why don't we do something about the road and prevent the accidents?" But upon raising the issue with the elected officials in charge of the road, the church was castigated for being too political.

Dom Helder Camara said it this way: "when I give food to the poor I am called a saint. When I ask why the poor have no food, I am called a communist."

Society has never taken kindly to prophets who tell unpopular truths. Look at Jesus. So long as he remained an itinerant preacher telling people in the boondocks how to live more faithful lives, the political establishment didn't care. But when he drove the money changers and sellers of animals for sacrifices out of the temple, saying it was supposed to be a house of prayer for all nations, not a den of thieves, they began trying to figure out how to kill him. Prophets who suggest changing the status quo are not welcomed by those who benefit from it.

The church's role as prophet is even more important just for this reason. An individual is easily squelched. But a church is not. The church also has a corporate memory. It may take years for an idea to build and percolate. Sometimes it takes more than a generation. Think of the role of the Catholic Church in Poland. There it did take more than a generation for the church-supported Solidarity movement to lead the country back to independence. The church in Russia is enjoying a tremendous resurgence. These things take time. An individual prophet doesn't have the staying power to see it through.

Another strength of a prophetic church is the group discernment process. It is one thing for an individual to have a big idea, but it is quite another when a church examines that idea, prays over it, and discerns that God is calling the church to this particular prophetic role.

I'm thinking of how Ron Claassen began the Victim Offender Reconciliation Program here in Fresno. He saw the original program in Indiana and realized that he was called to bring the program to Fresno. It took a couple of years of talking to church people about the idea before there was a base of support to begin. The idea was so strange. Who could imagine bringing victims and offenders together! One Highway Patrol officer Ron and I met with in a group setting called it a dangerous and damnable idea. But the process of discernment continued. The idea grew and developed. Things were tried and refined. A board was formed from supporting church people, cases were

taken, and you are here today as a result almost fifteen years after Ron brought the idea to Fresno.

Where does that sort of prophetic imagination and staying power come from? An individual with a big idea would be hard-pressed to hang in there. The power of the church discerning the idea and confirming it, then lending its support is a powerful force.

The church has been given revealed principles for living in peace with justice and compassion. It hasn't always lived up to those principles, but where it has accepted its prophetic role things have happened.

As we discuss legislation here today and tomorrow, we will be asking whether the church should be involved in the legislative process, and if so, how? Is there a type of prophetic voice which is singularly appropriate for the church? Is the church just another self-interested pressure group? How does the church discern what sort of legislation it ought to be espousing? The church is a big, diverse organism. Its members hold almost any view of social policy you can name. How then can it be involved as an institution in specific legislation?

The New Testament assumes that followers of Jesus are not running the country, and that most of them are not from classes which have much opportunity to affect the larger society. Some upper class people were involved. At least one member of the Sanhedrin seems to have been a follower to some extent. But there are no rules laid out for running a Christian nation. There are no specific rules for Christian legislation, but that does not mean there are no principles to apply to those activities.

It does mean that careful discernment needs to be used by the church when it approaches the question of what makes legislation more or less acceptable or desirable to the church. If someone is going to propose legislation in the name of the church, or some subset of it, how is that choice processed? Who needs to be involved? Can a parachurch organization do its own thing without consulting the broader church? How about the Center for Peacemaking and Conflict Studies at Fresno Pacific College? When we are approached to support or oppose legislation, or consulted in the drafting of legislation, as we are with some regularity, how and with whom do we process the issues involved?

The Old and New Testament prophets tended to be loners. They heard God speaking to them, and told people about it. How do we moderns, especially in our various groups, hear God speaking a clear word? The biblical prophets also tended to say what was wrong with the status quo. You didn't see them drafting social legislation,

for the most part. The original Joseph signed on to run Egypt's entire social program, but he is pretty much alone among Bible characters in having done so.

The church is called to speak with a prophetic voice. We are also called to discern how faithful servants of God do that in a modern context. These meetings are part of that process. Talk is good, but the church is also called to

3. Work toward the welfare of all members of society.

When Christians witness to the love and power of God, the point they are making is that God has a plan for humankind. One aspect of that plan is a special concern for the poor and powerless. A special concern that justice be done with mercy. The best interests of the rich and powerful are not a concern, generally speaking, since they are doing just fine. The New Testament book of James says it this way in chapter 2 (NRSV):

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,' and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. But someone will say, 'You have faith and I have works.' Show me your faith apart from your works, and I, by my works, will show you my faith.

The false dichotomy between faith and works has ever been a problem for Christians. Is right belief enough, or is action necessary? Many Christian groups say that a confession of Christ as Lord is enough. Others believe, with James, that faith which does not result in works of compassion is dead.

This issue has large repercussions for our discussions at this conference. If Christians need only concern themselves with having the correct intellectual belief, their participation in calling society to peace, justice and compassion will be small, and an afterthought in their religious lives. It is nice, but doesn't matter unless it can also lead to others obtaining the same correct belief. This would mean that any acts of compassion would be motivated primarily by a desire to lead the objects of compassion to correct belief.

Alternatively, acts of compassion would be motivated primarily by enlightened self interest. After all, if I support homeless shelters and rescue missions, it is less likely that I'll find homeless people camped out on my porch, or messing up the mall where I shop. For that matter, if I help rehabilitate offenders, I'm less likely to be a victim.

The interest of Christians in restorative justice has found its impetus so far in the belief that what we do matters, that good works flowing out of a grateful heart are the hallmark of a Christian. Our efforts to bring peace, justice and compassion to the arena of criminal justice have ultimate importance to us personally, as well as improving the conditions of society generally.

Jesus summed up the whole law and the prophets this way: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and your neighbor as yourself. When asked "who is my neighbor?" he told the story of the good Samaritan, extending the concept of neighbor to all persons who need a neighbor.

Interest in restorative justice can be motivated by pragmatism or humanism. It simply works better, and is better for people. You don't need to be religious to be in favor of restorative justice. Restorative justice is not, inherently, a Christian thing. But Christians have special reasons to be interested in restorative justice. Not only is it pragmatic and humanistic, it is consistent with biblical teaching on how a person of faith responds to the world. It is this added dimension which draws Christians and others who value the Bible toward restorative justice. It is a driving force. It is the reason the concepts of restorative justice have been rediscovered and promoted primarily by Christians to this point, although that is beginning to change.

I have spoken mostly about Christians, since my subject is the church and society. Any group which values the Bible has similar motivation. There are religions and cultures which see the Bible not as a holy book, but as an ancient book of wisdom, deserving of serious consideration. The wisdom of the Bible as it applies to restorative justice will ring true to all these other persons who value the Bible.

The church does have a role to play in society by working toward the welfare of all members of society. The importance of this role is that the church sees itself as called by God to demonstrate how things could be. It is one thing to tell people another way would be better, and quite another to demonstrate it. This past year I was part of such a project. Mennonite Central Committee has had workers in Laos since the bombing ended in 1973. Every effort to help redevelop that country devastated by the heaviest aerial bombardment ever experienced by any country was hampered by unexploded ordnance. People trying to plant gardens or do any other digging were in grave danger of hitting unexploded bombs. More people have been killed by bombs since the bombing ended than during nine years of round-the-clock bombing.

MCC tried a variety of ways to deal with the bombs, finally hitting on a good method of training local people to use metal detectors and then probe the metal found, blowing up bombs that were found where they were found. Rather than go around the world telling people they should help Laos, MCC used its own money donated by

churches, to train twenty Lao deminers, equip them and provide experts to guide them. That was about two years ago. As a result of demonstrating how it could be done and talking to governments about it, today there are millions of dollars being donated by almost a dozen countries and US Special Forces EOD experts training Lao people. By year's end we expect there to be 500 people working at destroying these bombs.

In the same way, VORP was started here in Fresno. The church didn't tell the criminal justice system to start VORP. It just did it. Now the criminal justice system can look at that project and imagine other ways to use the same principles.

Humanistic motivations do not have the driving force or staying power of religious conviction. Neither do humanistic motivations demand strict adherence to principles which are seen as right from an absolute perspective. A humanist or pragmatist does not necessarily see eternal principles at work in restorative justice. It is easier for them to modify inconvenient principles. Victim Offender programs all over the country have demonstrated how a restorative justice program can become little more than a way to collect restitution in a gentler fashion when the vision for restoration is lost in the search for steady income.

A person working out of religious motivation, on the other hand, understands God's call to *shalom*, wholeness, as a timeless call. That which leads to wholeness in relationships is good today, and a thousand years from now. Principles found in the Bible have a more lasting quality because they aren't self-defined. The value of peace, justice and compassion come from outside us, from a source of absolute truth. As such, they are much more difficult for a Christian to set aside than some principle of the moment.

The church has a reservoir of wisdom and truth in the Bible, and a role to play in witnessing to that truth in a call to the society of its day toward peace, justice and compassion. But, as the book of James suggests, a faith which calls others to these things without also practicing what it preaches is a dead thing.

Conclusion

The church has at least three roles to play in the society in which it finds itself:

1. Witness to God's love and power.
2. Call society to peace, justice and compassion.
3. Work toward the welfare of all members of society.

The call to restorative justice comes from an experience of God's mercy. Having been restored to God by the work of Jesus on the cross, it is natural to respond by working toward the restoration of others. The process of restoring people to their own society is the beginning of seeing them restored to relationship with God. That is part of the work to which Christians are called. As it says in 2 Corinthians (NRSV):

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ.

The church has a ministry of being, telling and doing. To be a witness, to tell the surrounding society of its conviction that peace, justice and compassion are the better way, and to demonstrate its belief through action. It is my own hope that the doing and the witnessing will be consistent with the telling, and that those separated from society and from God will be restored.

Duane Ruth-Heffelbower, an attorney and Mennonite pastor who also serves as Associate Director of the Center for Peacemaking and Conflict Studies of Fresno Pacific College, has two books available from Herald Press which touch on the themes of this address. They are *The Christian and Jury Duty* and *The Anabaptists are Back: Making Peace in a Dangerous World*.