

**The Unique Role of the Church in A Troubled Society** by David W. Gill (1993)

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F O U R T E E N

**The Unique Role  
of the Church  
in a Troubled Society**

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*David W. Gill*

**One Definition and Two Mistakes**

“You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” This, in a nutshell, is the church’s “social ministry” and the heart of its unique role in a troubled society. Our calling is not to “leave things be” in society; nor are we permitted to make things worse for our neighbor. We are to love our neighbor. The importance of this love command derives partly from its position near the beginning of Israel’s holiness code (Leviticus 19-26).<sup>1</sup> To be holy as God is holy includes loving your neighbor as yourself. In the New Testament James calls this the “royal law,” and Paul urges Christians to “love your neighbor as yourself” in gracious fulfillment of the whole law.<sup>2</sup>

Most of all, of course, it is because Jesus makes neighbor-love central that his followers must do so as well. In the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, Jesus gives the double love command (love God, love your neighbor) as the answer to the law question. The first and greatest commandment in the law, the one on which all the law and prophets depend—is the double love command. But in the Gospel of Luke Jesus also gives the double love command as the answer to the gospel question, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” You cannot get any more central than this: the answer to the law question and the answer to the gospel question are the same: love the Lord your God and love your neighbor as yourself.<sup>3</sup>

The social mission and ministry of the church consists of loving our neighbors. Of course, this is where the challenge really begins! Who is my “neighbor”? Only my brothers and sisters? My enemies? And what does it mean to love? At the

innerlife alone. The God of Abraham, Deborah, David, Mary, and Paul, is creator, sustainer, and redeemer for the whole earth and the whole of humanity. This is no esoteric, partisan, liberal, or socialistic reading of the Bible. Biblical faithfulness calls us clearly to carry out a mission in the world that includes not only "telling the old, old story of Jesus," not only praying, but promoting public righteousness and healing human hurts. It is a mistake to withdraw from society or to reduce the social ministry of the church to less than what God has called us to.

But another tempting error must be addressed. In the early seventies, a television producer in San Francisco asked if I would come to a live Sunday evening interview program. The featured guest was a high-profile local pastor and the producers wanted a studio audience that would generate some good discussion. For the first twenty minutes of the program the pastor, cheered on by the host, exulted in the fact that his church was no longer behind the times as were the vast majority of Christians. It was time, he said, for Christians to show some leadership in society, which he illustrated with many examples.

Full of truth and righteousness (though not very full of love, I regret to say), I pounced on the minister with the first question: "Pastor, I agree with you that the church is too often behind the times and that it ought to show some leadership. But every one of your examples—blessing gay liaisons, marching against the Vietnam War, sponsoring jazz, rock, and dance happenings on Sunday mornings, chanting 'I am somebody,' and so forth—is in fact not innovative at all. In every case you have illustrated a long-standing practice of the church *following* the world [in this case about five years after these things achieved broad popularity in San Francisco]. How is this leadership?" Even as I spoke those words, the pastor went from exultation to anger. For the rest of the program, an enraged "emperor with no clothes" shouted about his fine dress.

If the first mistake is withdrawal, the second one is conformity ("worldliness" is what oldtimers called it). Social activism can be as much a betrayal of the calling of the church as social withdrawal. It is not enough for us just to run out there and get involved, if in so doing the church conforms to the world, following its agenda and using its tactics. But if we do not consciously, deliberately, prayerfully ask God to shape our Christian stance and strategy on social issues, we shall inevitably be shaped by something else (tradition, fear, the mass

media, personal economic factors, and so forth).<sup>4</sup>

It doesn't really matter, if it is: the world of the hippie counterculture or radical left (mirrored so skillfully by the San Francisco church mentioned above), or the world of tea-sipping, respectable Christian rationalism in C. S. Lewis's Cambridge (so admired by his presentday followers), or even the world of suburban, Republican middle-class nuclear families fit for a Norman Rockwell painting (where I came from). These are not necessarily bad worlds. But they are the world. Christians are called and sent to be *in the world* (no withdrawal or escape can be the will of God), but *not of the world* (they must not derive their character or agenda primarily from the world).<sup>5</sup> Whether we prefer the latest, politically correct world, or the reassuring order and comfort of the conservative world, it is always a mistake to send the church out in the world's uniforms with the world's playbook.

One mistake is withdrawal; the other is conformity. But I close with two footnotes on the latter: first, the pastor I rudely challenged twenty years ago continues today stronger than ever and, in my opinion, has done many good things for San Francisco. Second, we must always remember D. L. Moody's response to a critic of his evangelistic methods: "Well, brother, I like my way of doing it better than your way of not doing it." Still, worldly activism is a mistake, just like pie-in-the-sky withdrawal. God calls us to a better way.

### Rebuilding the Foundations

Our Lord's command, underscored by the apostles Paul and James, is to love our neighbor as ourself. Some kind of social ministry is implied by this. But what shall we build? We must be careful not to start building on an unstable foundation. We might achieve an illusion of success for a while but it is just a matter of time before our structure is shaken down, possibly hurting many of those we intended to shelter. It is pointless at best, dangerous at worst, to try to activate the church in a social ministry if the very foundation is not being strengthened at the same time.

The foundation we need is the Word of God given in Scripture and Jesus Christ. The Bible with Jesus at the center is the foundation for faithful, durable, social ministry—just as it is for any other aspect of Christian individual and corporate life. Unfortunately, despite exceptions, our churches are full of men

and women whose knowledge and understanding of this Word of God is weak and imbalanced. This weakness makes us individually and corporately easy prey for false prophets, ignorant teachers, and skillful propagandists—both within and outside Christian circles. We are easily swayed by the rhetoric of one or another interest group in the world if we are not firmly founded on the Word of God.

Pastors and lay leaders, therefore, must rebuild the foundation consisting of the whole counsel of God. Our social ministry should rise like an attractive new building on this foundation. Not just any foundation will do; but neither can just any building be erected on a given foundation. The right foundation makes for strength and guides the basic overall shape of the building. What I mean by the whole counsel of God can be achieved when we focus on the great themes and classic texts of biblical revelation. It is too easy to be embroiled in the secondary exotica of life or Scripture. The exhilarating richness and insight of God's Word is lost if we "major on the minors." Phase one in social ministry is to build into our churches a robust understanding of and love for God and what God is doing in history.

This is not the place for a comprehensive exposition of the foundation of social ministry in "the Bible with Jesus at the center" as I have described it. But let me briefly suggest how four major biblical-theological motifs can become a foundation for social ministry. These motifs are creation, fall, redemption, and consumation.

First, let us consider creation.<sup>6</sup> After all, John's Revelation (especially chapter 4) suggests that God's creation will be a master theme of our heavenly celebration. Not only Genesis but the Psalms, Jesus, and Paul can deepen and enrich our understanding of God's creational purposes for the earth and its people. Our mandate to serve as stewards and caretakers of creation, "creating, nurturing, and sustaining" in God's image, can become a guiding motif for our own presence in the world. Environment, ecology, work, rest, and human relations are some key areas where our social ministry can and must be built on the foundation of an understanding of creation.

Second, consider the fall, the nature of sin and evil.<sup>7</sup> Our culturally conditioned "gut reaction" is not a very reliable guide in telling us when to get righteously indignant about evil. We might be misled by a bourgeois reaction to novelty. Our "victimization" sensors might be going off, or our "political correct-

ness" antennae might be registering an offense. To discover the true, fundamental evils worth fighting against, we need to a foundation in Genesis 3 and 4, the denunciations of the prophets, the temptation and passion of Jesus, the theology of Paul, and the exposition of evil in the Apocalypse. Then we will be ready as Christians to provide helpful insight into our social ills. Not before.

Third, we consider redemption.<sup>8</sup> How does God want his people to relate to an imperfect human history? After all, our social ministry can never propose a recapitulation of creation pure and simple. We cannot go back to the garden. We must go forward. By the same token, Christian social ministry must not consist primarily of a nay-saying analysis of evil. God's primary response to a fallen, broken creation and its social issues is *redemption*. The scope of this redemption is breathtaking, for it includes the "whole creation"—which now "groans" as it yearns for renewal.<sup>9</sup> God's redemptive work brings forgiveness of sin and guilt. It makes for reconciliation and peace with God, neighbor, and enemy. Redemption counters death with eternal life in its robust wholeness and infinite future. At the heart of this redemptive action stand the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Do we wish to improve society? Do we wish to love those neighbors who are lost, hurting, feuding, guilt-ridden, violent, and/or in despair? Our social ministry must proceed *through the cross to break open the tombs* of our era. Redemption is the third, and indeed the central, part of the foundation.

Fourth, let us consider the future consummation of all things.<sup>10</sup> The redemptive work that begins as inconspicuously as seeds planted in the ground and is often frustrated in our conflictual era will be consummated in the glorious, coming day of the Lord. Because of sin and evil in history, creation is drastically flawed and redemption is always partial and contested. But our foundation includes a fourth component: the eschatological fulfillment of the redemptive promises of God. This perspective guides and qualifies our social ministry. It *guides* by illuminating the ultimate goal toward which we labor. It *qualifies* our work by giving us strong hope in a future in God's hands and by undercutting our tendency to be too impressed or depressed by our efforts. Humility and hope are great assets in social action, as is a clear sighting of the goal toward which we move.

In short, what is the purpose of our social ministry? What

broader vision gives motivation, meaning, and direction to our responses to social issues? Answer: the character and purposes of God. But this vision cannot guide if it remains unknown, or known only in its thinnest application to my immortal soul.

The great truths of creation, the fall, redemption, and consummation, as they are revealed in Scripture and centered in Jesus Christ, constitute the foundation of a Christian philosophy of life. What does it mean to "love our neighbor as our self" in a faithful, durable social ministry today? Something like this:

1) We shall view all of our neighbors as men and women made in the image and likeness of God, of incalculable worth and potential, as our fellow human beings commissioned by our Creator for stewardship of the earth.

2) We shall strive to discern and combat the true causes—individual, corporate, and structural—of our human misery, evil, and blindness.

3) We shall develop programs and responses not just to bandage wounds but to contribute toward a more profound restoration and health among individuals and in the structures of society—and we shall do it with the sacrificial love of the cross as well as the fraternal love of equals at table.

4) We shall act as the bearers of hope in God's future, fighting against despair and pride alike with humble confidence and joy.

Thus the foundations are rebuilt from the great themes and, I should now add, the "classic texts" (Ten Commandments, Beatitudes, Lord's Prayer, Romans, etc.). To be sure, there are other ways (i.e., than creation, fall, etc.) to get at the great themes (e.g., Father, Son, and Holy Spirit). So too, the list of "classic texts" is fluid. But is it not a disgrace if church members neither know nor understand, for example, the Ten Commandments, Psalm 23, Isaiah 53, and the Sermon on the Mount? Such texts capture central and powerful aspects of God's Word and will for us. They have nurtured Christian existence for centuries. To develop a social ministry out of touch with these sources is to build on a defective foundation.<sup>11</sup> Every Christian should know these classic themes and statements at the very foundation of our faith. We must continually reinforce and celebrate their truthfulness and pose questions about what these words from God mean for our lives today. This is building a solid foundation for the church's role in social issues.

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## **Agenda for Social Ministry**

How then shall we, the church, develop our role in a troubled society? How shall we decide what is important? Let us consider two possibilities. The first approach is what I would call "from below." We could develop our social agenda from some kind of survey of our community or our congregation or various experts and social observers. We might ask, "What, in order of urgency, are the most crucial social issues of our time?" Chances are the list would include things like the abortion debate, the problem of homelessness, health-care costs, AIDS, gay and lesbian rights issues, the pollution of our environment, the continuing growth of urban violence, the illegal drug trade, euthanasia and assisted suicide, the breakdown of marriage, the debate over obscenity, pornography, and vulgarity in the entertainment media, and so on. International issues such as the Islamic fundamentalist threat to the West, the civil wars in the Slavic countries, the rise of neo-Nazism in Germany, and South African apartheid may still be on some lists.

Then we could have meetings and consultations and decide how to respond to these problems. But since most of these discussions will involve great complexity, intense partisan feelings on various sides, and limited personal experience, our response can usually only be general, abstract, and symbolic. We might circulate a petition or pass a resolution condemning something. Though this sort of activity is sometimes important, more often than not it is a poor substitute for genuine social concern. Talk is cheap. Resolutions can do a great deal of harm to groups that are divided during their debate—and very little good to those addressed by the statement. Sometimes they are worthwhile, but they usually generate more heat than light.

Still, it is an important part of our social ministry to look out at our community and ask, "What are our neighbors' needs?" After all, the biblical foundation on which Christian social ministry is built includes the caring, prophetic look around us and the attentive, listening ear. Most of this outward look should focus on those near neighbors with whom some kind of living, human relationship is possible. Our neighbor love can become vague and abstract if we look past our own community to the nation and world. They are ultimately related, of course, so some of our agenda should include national and global challenges. But we begin to care for the world authentically and concretely in the person of our neighbor.

So if we look out on our community and see marriages in shambles, we could put good marriage workshops and resources on our agenda. If Johnny can't read we could offer tutoring programs. If school sports programs are cancelled for lack of funds we could step in with organized games and activities. If addiction and codependency are at crisis proportions, we could sponsor recovery groups. We could offer job training and placement assistance where that is needed, or start an alternative school or a credit union where good education or financial credit are hard to come by. We could sponsor a prayerful discussion of candidates and issues before elections. We could teach about sex, love, and the joys of birth to those prone to pregnancy and abortion. We could teach about the joy of covenanted, soul-sharing friendship between men and between women where those who crave it may think that gay and lesbian eroticism is the only way to find it.

Of course, if we are faced with resurgent racism, facism, or blatant injustice, we must have the courage and wisdom to make loud, public protest. But the final value of our social ministry is far less a function of the number of resolutions we pass, petitions we sign, protests we march in, and the number of our press clippings than it is the extent to which our daily ministry is shaped by Jesus' statement. "inasmuch as you did it to the least of these, you did it to me."<sup>12</sup> Our agenda must take pains to include the "unpopular poor," the truly poor who have no voice and no advocate. It is not enough to add our support to bandwagons on behalf of the "popular poor."

The second way to develop plans for our social ministry is what we might call "from above." Rather than (or more precisely "in addition to") our listening and looking around us, we can start from the foundation and from the center and move out from there in social concern. The foundation and center is the Word of God in Scripture and Jesus Christ. Hence the term, "from above." Remember that when we ask the question, "What would God do or say if he was in this world?" we have a powerful answer. God has spoken in our language, and he did come into this world in a very decisive way in Jesus of Nazareth. Christians are called to learn from and follow the one they call Lord and Master. Christians are commissioned to continue the very presence of Jesus Christ on earth as "the body of Christ."

So when Jesus and his followers in the Acts, not once or twice but continually, made a major effort to heal the hurting and feed



the hungry, do we really have to ask if these are a central part of our task? When Jesus reached out in love to children, do we have to ask whether children should be on our top ten issues list? When Jesus built a caring community that offered unprecedented honor and respect to women, when he and his successors created unity where barriers of class and race used to divide, do we have any doubt about our tasks? This is the social ministry of God on earth, and it is our ministry.

We have our priorities wrong if we think that the only way to develop our church's agenda for social ministry is to flip on the television, open the newspaper, or listen to our colleagues. No, first open your Bible with a prayer to God, "Lord, show me what you think is important for our social ministry." Why don't we invite the Ten Commandments to question and illuminate our social as well as personal lives? For example, what are we (and our culture) worshiping today? What do we sacrifice for? What is at the controlling and meaning center of our life? Do we in any way worship the visible work of our human hands? What is the meaning of the names and labels we use? Do we take in vain the name of God by the way we live? Do we treat those made in the image of God with contempt when we misuse or demean their names? Do we contribute to murder and killing in any indirect ways? Do we steal in covert ways? Is there such a thing as institutional theft by unfair taxes, wages, or interest rates, or by gouging patients desperate of our critical care in hospital or court? These are only examples of a different way to develop a list of urgent social issues.

The same approach "from above" can be pursued through reflection on the Beatitudes, the Sermon on the Mount, passages in the prophets or apostles' teaching, the Wisdom literature, or the great narratives of Old and New Testaments. Certainly, "from below" listening to the cries of our neighbors will yield many of the same concerns as our approach "from above." But a direct pursuit of God's agenda promises a more helpful and more profound social ministry. Can we really address problems of abortion, capital punishment, adultery, sex, and health-care costs before we address the most basic issue of who or what we worship?

By starting on the foundation and from the center, Christians will be empowered to bring something unique, innovative, and profound to our troubled times. Who needs Christians to pour holy water on Republican or Democratic party interests? Why

simply add a chorus of “amens” to this or that polarized interest group? Why can’t Christians bear witness to a unity that breaks down factional strife and introduces a third way of living? Why not? Because we Christians are all too often propagandized by the world and all too ignorant of our biblical foundation. And this ignorance is a terrible loss to a shallow world desperate for profound insight, a moribund political climate thirsting for true innovation, and a predatory economy in need of servant leadership and entrepreneurship.

We are called to be the salt of the earth, not (as Helmut Thielicke said) the honey of the earth sweetening things up a little, and most certainly not “earth amid earth,” more earth for the earth. Rather, we are to bring that special ingredient which preserves from decay, which, though not easy to see, affects the quality of the whole. We are to be the light of the world, illuminating things that might otherwise remain in darkness, offering direction, permitting growth to occur. We have been too eager for recognition and the legitimacy granted by the world. But for the sake of both God and the world, let’s not be “conformed to this world but . . . transformed by the renewing of [our] mind so that we may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.”<sup>13</sup>

When we turn to strategy, the same “from above” perspective applies. How shall we respond to our enemies? Why not observe how Jesus taught his community to respond. How can we promote God’s values and principles in a pagan environment? Check out Jesus’ strategy (not resignation, not silence, not cramming truth down peoples’ throats). Our politics are the politics of Jesus—not that of the Republicans or Democrats. While some politicians are doubtless personally Christian, their political strategies are often sub-biblical—aiming at electoral success more than truth and faithfulness.

In summary: Christian social ministry (“loving our neighbor as ourself”) is built on the foundation of the Bible with Jesus at the center as we respond to an agenda “from below” (listening to our neighbors’ needs, seeing their struggles) and, still more importantly, “from above” (finding ways to exhibit in word and deed God’s social concerns as revealed in Jesus and Scripture).

### **Servant Leadership in the Gathered Church**

Given this foundation and agenda, what is required of faithful leaders in the gathered church, so that social ministry will occur

to the glory of God? It is a theological error to view social ministry as an optional activity for the church. All aspects of the church's life have social dimensions. A major part of servant leadership is to identify these social dimensions that might otherwise be missed.<sup>14</sup>

1) *Worship and liturgy*. The pastor can work with the worship committee to ensure that our gathering for worship is not just a protected enclave from the world, not just a spiritual group therapy session, not a theologically one-sided affair. Hymns and scripture lessons should rehearse and celebrate the fullness and greatness of God; this necessarily includes God's acts and words with respect to our neighbors and our world. Our sharing of concerns and ministry reports should include social concerns. For this to happen, leadership and initiative are crucial. Without this our natural tendency is to limit our sharing to personal crisis (usually health) and current projects of our members. The fact that God cares about politics, nations, and our neighbors outside the sanctuary should be reflected in our services.

2) *Prayer*. Within the worship service as well as on special days of prayer and other occasions, congregational leadership must help the people of God to learn to pray about social matters. Our prayers of confession and intercession, as well as our prayers of praise and thanksgiving, can and should include social dimensions. Pray for those in authority and for those in need. Confess our social sins and failings. Praise God for signs of his grace and goodness in the world. Apart from its importance to the God who hears and to those for whom we pray, prayer for our neighbors and our enemies begins to transform us as we pray.

3) *Preaching and teaching*. Whether one follows the lectionary or develops sermon series from the great biblical texts and themes, the social dimensions of the Word of God must be presented with faithfulness and conviction. A sermon is good not primarily because of its literary or rhetorical quality but because of its truth and reality. It conveys the powerful truth of the Word of God, a truth that is social as well as personal. And it connects with the reality of the lives of the hearers, a reality that is social as well as personal. What is required here is not so much prophetic courage as simple faithfulness (in exposition of the Word that God has given) and genuine love (for the hearers in the reality of their daily lives). It is a mistake to drift

away from the truth of the Word or to stop short of the reality faced by the congregation.

4) *Adult education and small groups.* Adult education, study/caring groups, and special events are better contexts than Sunday morning worship for moving social ministry discussion to practical, specific conclusions. After all, most social ministry is ministry of the laity. Lay gifts and expertise can be developed best in group settings permitting extended discussion and participation by all concerned. With lay leaders the pastoral staff can steer church members toward study, discussion, planning, and action in social ministries. Periodic classes, conferences, and retreats can be scheduled for a focus on social ministries, just as many congregations have regular "missions emphasis" events.

5) *Pastoral care.* In providing pastoral care both to groups and individuals, the pastoral caregivers can work toward encouragement, correction, and reconciliation. Encouragement of individuals and groups taking on the often daunting challenges of social ministry, and correction of those heading in wrong directions, is an important leadership activity. Since we are created as social beings, some troubled parishioners are best served by encouragement to get involved in ministries of reaching out and serving others, not merely for the sake of the served but in contribution to the health and significance of the servant we recruit. Finally, with passions and convictions often running high on political and social questions, the pastor's leadership skills in reconciliation within the church is crucial.

Some of society's problems are experienced within our congregations. The church is itself a little society that must attend to the needs of its members for food, clothing, shelter, learning, and interpersonal relationships. The pastor cannot personally meet all of these needs and the formation of various recovery groups, assistance programs, and perhaps even a lay counseling program is often part of the internal social ministry of a church. Such does not only meet concrete needs but serve as a model of how to meet such needs in the broader community.

6) *Governance.* The structures and patterns of congregational decision making and administration need to be assessed and reformed to reflect the truth and justice we advocate in society beyond the gathered church. This is not a minor point of concern, for all too often church governance can drift along in

an autocratic or oligarchic mode—i.e., rule by one or by the few with power. Since all of our men and women have gifts of the Holy Spirit and special endowments of the Creator, since we are all members of the body but with differing functions, it is important to exhibit this unity in diversity, to invite and train broad participation in leadership and governance.

7) *Budget.* Leadership is also required in the formation of church budgets. Allocating some minimum portion (10 percent?) of the congregational budget for the direct social ministries of the church, for ministries of love and care for neighbors in need, not only helps those who are served but leads the congregation itself toward a higher view of the importance of God's social concern. This occurs most successfully, of course, when laity involved in social ministry are the advocates for budget additions or restructuring. But the pastor's leadership role in identifying relative financial priorities will be crucial at various points.

### **Ministry in a Troubled Society**

What then, is the external shape and look of a church with a faithful social ministry? How does our servant leadership look from the outside? We do not want to overlook the crucial role of the church as the bearer and proclaimer of the good news of Jesus Christ. Our faithful evangelism and missionary activity is a critical contribution to a troubled world as we share Jesus' invitation to forgiveness and eternal life. So too, we do not minimize the importance of our prayers on behalf of the world and our neighbors. This is clearly fundamental and without it any additional social ministry is a waste of time and a poor substitute for our true calling. It is also no small social contribution when a church takes care of its own. We shudder to think of the load that would descend on overtaxed governmental programs if the churches stopped caring for so many of their own people.

Nevertheless, the church's social ministry to a troubled society can be summarized as follows:

1) *Pluralistic.* The tendency of societies is to become monistic and even totalitarian, with the centralized state absorbing more and more power as well as responsibility for the lives of its citizens. The state demands and receives greater and greater loyalty and imposes greater and greater uniformity on the lives of its people. But unchecked, centralized power is unhealthy

for a society. Thus, the first external contribution of the church to society is to contest that power, to open up society by creating another power pole, another loyalty. This sounds abstract and theoretical, but its importance is utterly crucial in preventing authoritarian government. In another phrase, our first contribution to society is simply one of "being the church," of "being the people of Jesus Christ."

2) *Pilot plant.* Our society is deeply troubled and has serious problems with respect to poverty, jobs, education, violence, addiction, child-rearing, family relations, and the like. By addressing these issues as they surface in our congregational experience, the church becomes a kind of pilot plant testing out new and alternative ways of coping with such problems. The world is desperate for creative, workable, proven alternatives. Our social ministries can serve the world as models of alternative paths, some of which might be transferable to other community groups, and some models for government programs.

3) *An educational, material, and therapeutic resource.* There is every reason for the church to serve not just its members but the broader community as a resource. Tutorial and educational programs to make up for weaknesses in public education may be opened up to our neighbors. Job training, financial management, and legal educational services can be ways we serve our community. On the material plane our food, clothing, and buildings can be shared with those in need. Donations of money can be made to support social programs near and far. Some basic health care can be provided through a parish nurse or doctor. Counseling and recovery services can be opened up to the community. Prisoners, hospital patients, and shut-ins may be visited. Those without transportation can be assisted. In all of these ways, the church serves as a resource for the external world of neighbors we are commanded to love. Wouldn't it be wonderful if our church was well-known in the community as the place to go where you can get help?

4) *Public advocacy and community organization.* Finally, a group within the church, the church as a whole, the denomination, and interdenominational alliances can organize for public advocacy. Provided this kind of action results from careful study and prayer, and provided it is faithful to the Word of God at its foundation and to the conviction of the people in whose name it is presented, public statements and actions may be an appropriate form of social ministry. Advocacy may entail

private or public meetings with community and political leaders, letter-writing campaigns, consumer boycotts, publicity and advertising campaigns, and even public marches and demonstrations. Unjust laws and corrupt, oppressive practices may require such action, especially if all other strategies have failed.

There is great danger of losing or compromising our specific calling as the reconciling people of Christ if we take sides in heated public debate, so this is a strategy of last resort. But we cannot say that such a time will never come, for instances of extreme violence, cruelty, and injustice are all too frequent in human history. We are at greatest risk of error if the social darkness comes and we have not been faithful in shoring up our foundations and clarifying our agenda while it is yet day.

### Conclusion

1) A faithful social ministry is an essential aspect of the life of the church of Jesus Christ. Avoiding the extremes of irresponsible withdrawal and conformist worldliness, the church acts as the body of Christ "in but not of" the world, loving our neighbors as ourselves.

2) Building a faithful social ministry requires a strong foundation in biblical theology through which God's concerns can become our own. It also requires careful attention to the cries of those in need around us.

3) Social ministry *begins internally* as the local church trains and cares for its own. Worship, prayers, preaching, Christian education, and pastoral care are avenues for the thoughtful celebration of God's social concern.

4) Social ministry *proceeds externally* in service to those outside the church. In the name of Jesus we offer material support and personal care to our neighbors in need. In harmony (not competition) with our evangelism, we speak and work for justice and love, mercy, and healing, to the glory of God.

The church must always be grateful for efforts made by the government or other agencies in addressing human needs. But the church has its own unique contribution to make and it is to the church's benefit, as well as to that of the world, that it carry that out.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Leviticus 19:18.

<sup>2</sup> James 2:8; Romans 13:8-10; Galatians 5:13-14.

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 22:36-40; Mark 12:28-31; Luke 10:25-28.

<sup>4</sup> Jacques Ellul's *The Subversion of Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986) is the most powerful argument I've ever read on this subject.

<sup>5</sup> This language is from John 17.

<sup>6</sup> Two helpful studies of creation are Henri Blocher *In the Beginning* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1984), and James M. Houston, *I Believe in the Creator* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980).

<sup>7</sup> See Bernard Ramm, *Offense to Reason: The Theology of Sin* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall: Temptation* (New York: Macmillan, 1965).

<sup>8</sup> John Howard Yoder's *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972) remains a stimulating, helpful discussion of the social implications of Jesus and redemption.

<sup>9</sup> Romans 8:19-22

<sup>10</sup> George Eldon Ladd's *The Presence of the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974) lays the sort of eschatological foundations we need. The building remains for us to do (as in the case of creation, fall, and redemption as well), but this is where we start.

<sup>11</sup> Stephen C. Mott, *Biblical Ethics and Social Change* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982) is an excellent introduction to a social ethics that flows from the biblical source.

<sup>12</sup> Matthew 25:31-46.

<sup>13</sup> Romans 12:1-2.

<sup>14</sup> While I don't agree with everything in his book, Dieter T. Hessel's *Social Ministry* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, revised edition, 1992), is by far the best introduction to the issues and possibilities discussed in the remainder of this chapter.