

Editor's note: The following two essays by Calvin Van Reken and Peter Vander Meulen were initially presented orally by the two authors as opening statements in a panel discussion to faculty and students at Calvin Theological Seminary on 10 December 1998. With slight modification, they are provided here as a contribution to an important ecclesiological discussion about the church's social responsibility.

## The Church's Role in Social Justice

Calvin P. Van Reken

Let me begin by calling attention to a distinction that is essential to thinking clearly about the issue of the church's engagement of social issues: the distinction between the church as an *institution* and the church as an *organism*. This distinction is between two ways of thinking of, or conceptualizing, the church, and thus two ways of speaking about it. Neither one of these ways is right and the other wrong, nor one proper and the other improper—they both have their legitimate use.

One can think of the church as an institution, or the *mater fidelium* as Berkhof calls it. The church as an institution is formal organization that sets out to accomplish a specific purpose. It is an agent. It can do things; it can say things; it has its own voice. As an institution, it has its own purposes and plans, its own structure and officers, and its own mission. It has its own proper sphere. In many ways it parallels other institutions, like governments or schools. Working for the church makes you a church worker, and the work you do is church work. (Note that not all work done by Christians is church work.)

One can also conceive of the church as an organism, or the *mater coetus* as Berkhof calls it. This is to consider the church as the body of believers, the communion of believers. It differs from the institutional church in that it refers to the church, not as a unified organization, but rather as an aggregate of individual believers. In this aggregate, each Christian is, of course, a personal agent. Each Christian has a purpose and a call in God's plan. Each has a vocation, a calling, whether it is as a plumber, a teacher, or a politician.

From this also follows a distinction between *church work*, which is the work that a Christian does as an agent of the institutional church, and *kingdom work*, which is the work that a Christian does in service of his Lord—but not as an agent of the institutional church.

## The Christian's Involvement in Society

The question for this article is *not* whether individual Christians or groups of Christians may or should address social issues. Of course we should. Each Christian should take his or her beliefs and values into the public arena and apply them to the important social issues of the day. This is a significant part of kingdom work.

Part of our responsibility as Christians is to exercise our compassion and love for others in tangible ways. Christians should feed the hungry, comfort the sorrowing, and visit the sick. As part of their kingdom service, Christian plumbers plumb since there will not be any leaks in the kingdom. In kingdom service, Christian teachers teach in the sure hope that while now we see darkly, one day we will see face to face, and in that day there won't be any ignorance. As kingdom workers, Christian truckers truck because in the kingdom the good things God has created need to be distributed far and wide.

Also, individual Christians can singly, or through Christian organizations, address the government for solutions to problems that are within the government's proper sphere. One of the simplest ways we in the West carry out this responsibility is to vote for those persons whom we believe will address the problems of the day effectively. Working through Christian organizations, such as Bread for the World or the Center for Public Justice, Christians attempt to influence government policies for the good. Christians are called to be responsible, compassionate, law-abiding citizens.

But these are our responsibilities as individual Christians, or as groups of Christians, and they are all kingdom responsibilities. As each of us carry out his or her civic responsibility before God, it is extremely important that we not confuse what we are saying and doing with church work, for reasons that I will shortly make clear.

## The Church's Involvement in Society

Now I will turn to the issue of the institutional church and social justice, which is the main issue of this article.

The primary work of the institutional church is not to promote social justice, it is to warn people of divine justice. Its primary business is not to call society to be more righteous but to tell persons of the righteousness of God in Jesus Christ. Its primary work is not to tell us who to elect to public office, it is to tell those in every nation of the One who elected many for eternal life. The primary work of the institutional church is to open and close the kingdom of God and to nurture the Christian faith. This it does primarily through the pure preaching of the gospel, the pure administration of the sacraments, and the exercise of church discipline.

This is not to say that the institutional church should *never* promote social justice or speak out on behalf of the victims of injustice. There are times during



...in broad terms, the proper goals that social policy should promote. For example, the church should speak out and work for a society that protects all its citizens against acts of violence.

But normally, the church should not take it upon itself to entertain the political question of *how* a particular society can best achieve this goal. That is, the institutional church should, in general, avoid policy statements. Regarding social violence, is gun control a good idea, or will it simply arm only criminals? Are more police officers the best idea, or bigger jails, or mandatory sentences, or some combination of these? The truth is that these are questions that are beyond the institutional church's expertise as a church.

My view is that the institutional church should speak out against preventable poverty but, in most cases, must not recommend exactly which social policies will best reduce poverty. For example, what kind of public assistance, if any, is best, or is private welfare the better option? This is a question that the institutional church as such is not in a privileged position to answer. No doubt individual Christians have their opinions, but I believe that it is taking the Lord's name in vain to claim divine status for your political judgment.

If I decide to vote for some particular political candidate, then that is my decision before God, and I am accountable to him for it. But it is quite a different thing for the council of a congregation to tell its members that voting for that candidate is the Christian choice. If I protest the new welfare rules and write a letter to my congressman with reasons why they are unwise, then that is my decision before God and I am accountable to God for it. But it is a quite different thing for me as a pastor to preach in a sermon that the church stands opposed to welfare reform.

So, the institutional church may outline the broad goals or ends of social policy but normally should not endorse specific policy proposals. However, on some occasions, the church should speak out against a particular social policy. It should do so when the policy is clearly immoral. A policy can be immoral either because the goal of the policy is evil, as in the case of ethnic cleansing, or because the policy is itself immoral, although the goal is morally desirable. Legalized abortion may be one way the government hopes to reduce poverty, a worthy intent, but the church ought to oppose abortion and speak out against it. And so it has. The Christian Reformed Church through its synod has officially spoken out against legalized abortion on several occasions.

It is my opinion that when a synod, rather than some denominational committee or worker, speaks out against some social injustice, it helps guarantee that the specific policy is *clearly* immoral. I do not mean, of course, that moral truth is decided by majority vote. My claim is not ontological. Rather, it is merely epistemological: A significant difference of opinion among Reformed Christians regarding a policy issue is evidence that the morality of the issue is not clear.

Now consider the two dangers the church must avoid if it tries to address all and only clearly immoral social policies. The first is that it will fail to address all the clearly immoral policies, and so will be silent when it should speak out. In South Africa, some churches failed to speak out against the clearly immoral policy of apartheid. A second, even worse danger, is that a church will speak out and defend the wrong side of the moral issue. When this happens, the church is complicit in the injustice, as happened in some U.S. churches who opposed civil rights for African-Americans.

The church *is* in a privileged position with respect to knowing what is clearly morally permissible and what is morally impermissible, for it has God's written Word. Thus, it should speak out on the clear moral injustices of the day. The truth is, however, that most political issues, in the Western world at any rate, are debates between two or three morally permissible policy options. Choosing among such options requires a kind of worldly wisdom to which Christians as such have no special claim.

Finally, let me give one more reason why the institutional church should be reluctant to enter into the political and social arguments of the day. The reason is this: It tends to compromise the primary work of the church. It does so in two ways. First, it saps energy and resources out of the primary work. Second, it creates a mental association between the institutional church and some political agenda. There are churches that I would not consider attending on a regular basis, not necessarily because their theology is mistaken, but because I associate them with a political agenda with which I personally take issue. To link the cause of Christ with specific social policies that are not morally obligatory seriously impedes the primary work of the church. For these reasons we ought to resist the temptation to use the institutional church as a mouthpiece for our political convictions.

## Summary

First, individual Christians are called to be responsible, compassionate, law-abiding citizens.

Second, the institutional church should speak out on the general goals that a society should pursue. It should speak out when the social goals being pursued are evil, as with so-called ethnic cleansing. It should speak out against clearly immoral policies even when they are intended to achieve morally acceptable ends.

However, with respect to the vast majority of political options (whether for or against certain social policies or for or against certain political candidates), the institutional church should keep quiet. It has no privileged knowledge that allows it to choose between these, and, when it does so anyway, it impedes the accomplishing of the primary mission of the institutional church.



Finally, on those clearly moral matters when the church should address a social problem or policy proposal, the church should do so officially in and through its ecclesiastical assemblies. When the issue that must be addressed is national or international, it should be addressed through Synod, not through the denominational board of trustees or some office in the denominational building.

*CJ* 31 (1999): 202-206

## The Church and Social Justice

*Peter Vander Meulen*

I've spent most of my working life with the Christian Reformed World Relief Committee (CRWRC) in positions overseas—Bangladesh, the Dominican Republic, West Africa—and from that perspective, I want to reflect on the world of the poor in the light of my Reformed heritage and my relationship to Christ.

### Assumptions

I want to start by making explicit seven key assumptions on which I base my thesis:

Number one: The basic tenets of Reformed doctrine are given and are more or less commonly understood.

Number two: The gospel is truly holistic and conveys a saving, reconciling grace not just for human souls but indeed for ourselves as integral beings—indeed, for all of creation itself.

Number three: All of God's created images are entitled to respect and to dignity—all creation groans for a restored relationship with its creator—whether it acknowledges that or not.

Number four: The church of Christ lives out a paradox: We are called *out of* the world even as we are called to be *in* the world.

Number five: The Bible, and Christ in his ministry, repeatedly holds up the poor and those the world considers of no account as having great value. And he explicitly holds them up as his surrogates among us now, and as having a claim upon us because of his care for them.

Number six: Even as good progress has been made in overcoming hunger and poverty in some parts of the world, any hunger and misery in a world with sufficient food for all is a scandal.

Number seven: Although we have done much in ministry, we have not stretched ourselves out of our areas of comfort and security to meet the poor at their points of pain and poverty. We are really good at relief but less good at personal involvement and scared to death of advocacy; of standing up for the poor and powerless.

### Thesis

Now in the light of these assumptions I propose the following thesis:

The institutional church needs to vigorously encourage—at personal and corporate levels (that is to say congregational, classical, denominational, and ecumenical levels)—faithfulness in doing justice. This need for faithfulness applies to our own personal and corporate (church) affairs as well as personal and church witness in the public square.

By faithfulness in doing justice I mean at least the following three things—in practice. First, identification—be sensitive to injustices that affect those who are poor and powerless. Second, encouragement—promote informed, inclusive, and lovingly tenacious discussion of these issues within our church. In other words, the church should be a community of moral discourse. Third, engagement—change our own behavior. Engage in direct action ministry. Be advocates for and with those who are disenfranchised. Raise these issues in the public square.

To put this more succinctly: Witnessing to issues of justice needs to be an integral part of our Christian Reformed corporate ministry. Some examples of these areas for witness are: life issues, such as euthanasia, abortion, and assisted suicide; wealth and poverty issues, such as the apparent inability of our global economy to sustain vast numbers of people while keeping others in luxury; racism and sexism issues; and stewardship issues, including the care for God's earth.

### Why

Why should the church, the CRC, renew and expand its involvement in reflecting on, acting on, and speaking on issues of injustice? I want to make clear that this is no new thing in the CRC that I am arguing for but rather a dramatic increase in the exposure and emphasis that we give to this area. I'm going to present a number of reasons. Further, I suggest that when taken together, they must *convict us* of our need to act. In reflecting on the reasons why, we must consider motive, opportunity, record, and complicity.

### Motive

The integrity of the gospel requires holistic (integral) ministry. The gospel message is an integral one. Ministry is essentially holistic. That, I believe, is a given. If the church is properly engaged in ministry, it must also be engaged in



public witness against those things that threaten, deny, nullify, or give the lie to that message. Once committed to ministry, we must be committed all the way.

### Opportunity

Rarely in history has the North American church, specifically, been in such a position to effectively engage in such witness. This is true, first, because we have unprecedented knowledge about global conditions. We are aware. Second, the (largely Christian) West is in a position to influence the global economy and global affairs as never before. The levers of power are in our hands. Third, because of the stunning advances in global communications, the Christian church, if it chooses, can transcend the barriers of distance, class, ethnicity, and culture and be truly inclusive in its discussions, decision making, and ministry.

### Record

The church has always been a force for social transformation, and it has been an advocate for the poor and powerless. From the earliest days of the Christian church, both the ordering of the church and its witness to the proper ordering of society has flowed from the incredible news that the Creator has redeemed his creation. The church has been called out of the world to be a channel of transforming grace. We are called to be in the world but not of it.

I submit that, with all sorts of notable lapses and exceptions, the Christian church has indeed been a channel for transformation and change in culture and society. God gives society good gifts through his church. Indeed the church and its members have been salt and light in this world. Bearing witness and going into action against injustice is nothing new for the church. It is an ancient and honorable thing!

### Complicity

The institutional church is implicated in societal and structural injustice. The church exists as a social entity. We take up institutional space. We are not some sort of ethereal body deciding whether or not to stand for justice. We are full and active participants and beneficiaries in systems that we also help to perpetuate. We are, wittingly or unwittingly, part of whatever has gone wrong. We must then also be institutionally active to begin to understand, undo, and restore.

Even if we could avoid this complicity, the church could be an accessory after the fact. To keep quiet is to speak volumes. I suggest that the absence of action and public witness or advocacy is not a neutral "safe" course of action. Silence and inaction are strong messages. Often we say a great deal by saying nothing. And so those of us looking for safe, neutral ground will not find it in silence.

### How

But do we have the means by which to address social issues? Do we have the capabilities to deal with significant but complex issues that continually come at us from all directions? Yes, there is a great deal that we can do. Here, I present eight how-tos.

First, we can promote regular and serious analytical work on issues of social justice from our institutions of higher education. This of course is already being done to an extent, but not always in an accessible, timely, and helpful fashion.

Second, the Christian Reformed Church has made major strides in service learning for its youth. We need to consider periodic "in-service learning" for denominational and congregational leadership as well.

Third, similar to service learning is an increase in CRC members who are involved in some form of ministry outside their normal boundaries. Adults are most open to learning when stretched and puzzled by new experiences. To act, reflect on, discuss, and pray about new experiences is to be open to learning and change.

Fourth, we need to increase our value on narrative. Paying attention to stories illustrating God's acts in our lives—both personal and corporate—builds identity in being God's people. It's important that these stories be more than just our own and those like ours. Our attention needs to include a wide spectrum of people. We need to be reminded of the true breadth of the family of God.

Fifth, there is no necessary link between being active in ministry and making changes in our ideas and behavior—growing and maturing. We need to develop materials and opportunities that guide and encourage reflection on the action ministries in which we are involved.

Sixth, advocacy for those who are poor and powerless is an important, legitimate ministry. We need to acknowledge this as a community of faith, celebrate it, and encourage small groups called to advocacy and justice ministry to be salt and light within their congregations.

Seventh, we can develop an action agenda for advocacy in the public square on which the entire denomination can basically agree and on which it can work.

Eighth, we need to encourage the formation of support and discussion groups for members striving to do justice in their vocations and callings.

### Conclusion:

Just as silence can speak volumes, so, too, can speaking volumes result in saying nothing. We need to avoid the trap of having prophetic words on every issue in the public square.

It is time also to throw out the idea that we should all try to force each other to think exactly alike on things. Groups within the church—with the blessing of the church—can and should take up issues with which they are called and competent to deal. They should be salt and light both within the church and without.

There are times when the institutional church must come to official grips with an issue of great moral or ethical significance. Practically speaking, it seems to make good sense to speak loudly and clearly on things about which we have broad agreement while speaking softly, tentatively, or only to ourselves on things about which we have little agreement.

In summary, whether or not to witness in the public square on matters of justice is not really a choice we have. We are doing so simply by existing as an institution. We are called to fight injustice on the basis of our obedience to the gospel message. It is urgent that we do so because people are suffering and we are able.