

## THE CONFESSION OF A LATECOMER TO THE SOCIAL GOSPEL

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I was in some ways precocious, becoming a pastor at 18, graduating from college at 19, and earning a doctorate before my 24th birthday. But in other, more important ways, I was retarded, for I did not develop a strong sense of social consciousness until I was well on my way to mid-life. The reason for this, I am convinced, is that my religion taught so well the importance of individual conversion and personal responsibility. I believed --quite sincerely, I think-- that the great need of our world was for individuals to turn their hearts and minds over to Christ and let him become the Lord and Master of their destinies. Then we would all live in a kind of peaceable kingdom, a' la Isaiah and Edward Hicks, and social inequities would take care of themselves.

When I went to teach at Vanderbilt Divinity School in 1965, the school was still recovering from a corporate act of protest a few years earlier, when Dean J. Robert Nelson and most of the faculty members resigned in sympathy with a black student named James Lawson, whom the chancellor of the university dismissed for leading a sit-in at a Nashville lunch counter. I appreciated the intentions of those who had laid their jobs on the line for their convictions, but at the time believed them to have been a bit foolhardy and irrational. I still did not understand the inseparability of the social gospel from the

gospel of salvation. If Christians would only do a better job of preaching the gospel of salvation, I thought, the social gospel would take care of itself.

My own heart, during all these years, was open to people of other races, and I was quite willing to share whatever I had, of money, status, or friendship, with anyone who needed any of these. But I was simply oblivious to the enormous pain of inequity and disenfranchisement under which people were living right in my own city. My wife and I were raising children, struggling to educate them, and dealing with our own marginal poverty. We were growing, hardworking, and happy, and it did not really occur to us that we were no more than semi-conscious of the great upheaval taking place in American society or of the place that we ourselves should be occupying in the battle for others' rights.

Then, in the mid-seventies, I began writing a series of devotional commentaries on the four gospels. By the time I had finished Matthew and Mark, I had a new sense of the centrality of social justice in the mission and message of Christ. When I got to Luke 4, and Jesus' declaration to the sabbath crowd in the synagogue that he had come to identify with the poor and broken elements of society, the theme had become fully orchestrated for me. Suddenly I saw his whole ministry in a new light. All that stuff about personal salvation I had imbibed as a young Christian was called into question. As true as it was, in one sense, there was another sense in which it had been used to justify the status quo in American society. In my case, and in millions of others, I suspected, it had anesthetized the believer against the true radicality of Jesus' messiahship and teachings!

In 1980, my spiritual journey led me to the pastorate of a large, upper-middle class church in Lynchburg, Virginia. It was one of the two leading white-collar churches in the community, filled with professionals and community leaders. At one count, there were 65 medical doctors in the membership, and an equal

number of lawyers, teachers, and bankers. What an opportunity we had, I thought, to provide constructive leadership for the city and contribute to the eradication of poverty and injustice, not only in the city itself but around the world.

Alas, I was still thinking like a retardate.

Most of those professionals and community leaders were as blind to Christ's real mission as I had been. Their lives were filled with good things -- fine homes, extended families, expensive automobiles, getaways in the mountains and at the seashore, membership in a beautiful country club, and enough stocks, bonds, and CDs to insure the future of all these things. They didn't hate and despise the blacks, the poor, and the foreigners, at least not openly, but they believed that the good Lord takes care of those who take care of themselves and they seemed reasonably assured that if anybody else in the world was having trouble it was because he or she simply neglected to follow the prescription for a good life they themselves had followed.

More and more, I found my preaching moving toward a prophetic denunciation of social ease and indifference. I didn't harp on the subject, because I really wanted to change people's minds, not alienate them. I thought often of a minister friend who had been to Haiti and seen the poverty there, and who had come back to his church in Tennessee and preached almost every Sunday on the evils of the rich and the importance of feeding the poor, until his congregation could stand it no more and asked him to leave. I had to be cagier than that, I realized, or I would end up as useless as my friend. So I used the tactic Henry Ward Beecher employed in his preaching against slavery, of speaking out in asides and in heartrending illustrations. I rarely missed an opportunity at a parenthetical remark or a story about the poor and disenfranchised that would mellow the hearts of the

wealthy and remind them that their very wholeness depended on their openness to their opposite numbers in society.

And the morning prayers -- what a golden opening they were for reminding people of God's real concerns in our world! There is nothing like a well-crafted liturgical prayer, I found, for instructing the congregation in the theology of social justice. In the prayer, after all, the minister is talking to God, not to them. He or she is not overtly stepping on their toes; they are only "overhearing" the remarks and petitions, as it were, not receiving them first hand. So my prayers were invariably filled with references to the poor and imprisoned, the blind and the sick, Russians and Latin Americans and South Africans, and anybody who was suffering anywhere, even those who were bloated by possessions and burdened by financial management.

I will not pretend that I converted my parish into a massive force for justice and good in the world. There were some modest gains. We opened a soup kitchen in an old building in the heart of the city, and one man who committed himself to this was responsible for getting a food bank located in the community. Our people contributed significantly to a food ministry organized by another, smaller congregation. And our overall giving to missions of charity doubled or perhaps tripled. But the progress was small in comparison with the possibilities. My heart ached at the sight of the greed and gluttony I saw in the church, and at the resoluteness with which some elders and deacons opposed any programs that promised a greater involvement in the fate of the poor or the fortunes of people who were not essentially like ourselves in all the "important" matters.

So, when I had the opportunity in 1986 to move to a large old church in near-downtown Los Angeles, I said goodbye to our graceful, green-lawned church in Virginia and hello to one of the most difficult and sensitizing undertakings of my life. The church to which we went

was the remnant of what had once been the most important congregation in the city, but it still occupied a magnificent cathedral building covering an entire city block. Our membership was primarily Caucasian -- people who had belonged to the church for 25 years or more -- but the changing neighborhood was now 52 percent Hispanic, 20 percent Oriental, 20 percent black, and only 8 percent white. There were 19 known gangs operating within a one-mile radius of the church property. Hungry, homeless, and desperate people streamed constantly into our reception hall. It was not an uncommon occurrence for the police to surround our building while searching for a fugitive, with helicopters buzzing around our rooftop for an hour or more.

Here, in this new setting, I continued to preach about God's desire for our world. Only, this time, my congregation was not all as clean and well dressed as the one in Lynchburg. Many were street persons, who had no change of clothing or place to take a bath. There were many homosexuals, some of whom were dying of AIDS. There were also a lot of elderly people living on fixed incomes and unable to contribute to the church. I felt the presence of Christ in this setting and I had been unable to feel him in the plush environs of my earlier church. What I wanted to do was to lead this church into becoming the Beloved Community in our location, sharing our lives and our talents and our resources (which were not inconsiderable, because of huge endowments) with one another and with the needy of our vast city.

Again, my prayers were a principal vehicle for the teaching of God's care for the under-privileged and the responsibility of those with power and property to help in the alleviation of human suffering. Our liturgy was a relatively "high" one, with many prayers and responses, and I consciously sought to use this as an opportunity to create a kind of weekly oblation of the congregation to the divine goal of a creative, sharing society.

With ministerial colleagues in the same part of the city, I helped to found Project Literacy Los Angeles, aimed at reducing the uncommonly high rate of illiteracy that was at least partially responsible for the crime and drug culture of the area, and Hope-Net, Inc., a volunteer organization for feeding the hungry and housing the homeless. I also served on the board of Safety-Net, Inc., an organization composed primarily of lawyers and paralegals who donated their time and energy to representing poor marginal folks unable to pay for legal services.

It was during my stay in Los Angeles that I discovered the writings of Kagawa, the great Japanese Christian and social activist. I had heard of him years earlier, but had never seen a copy of his writings. I thought my heart would explode with excitement. Here was a Christian who took the teachings of Christ about the poor and outcast so seriously that, while still a seminarian, he rented a room in the foulest part of the city of Kobe and took into his own care as many as ten or twelve persons at a time -- drug addicts, criminals, people with contagious diseases, and the abjectly poor.

I was accused. How little I was doing for humanity! How little my church was doing! I longed for us to do more. I stressed more than ever the warnings of Jesus that the rich will have a difficult time entering heaven. I preached and prayed for a greater sharing of ourselves and our property with the poor and homeless at our doors. I doubled my own giving, and increased my fervor for the assistance organizations I belonged to.

But how could I get others more involved? For several years, our church had sponsored an annual Lenten breakfast series with devotional speakers. In January 1989, I asked Garnett Phibbs, formerly director of the Council of Churches in Dayton, Ohio, and a recent member of our congregation, to use that year's series as a platform for outstanding speakers on the topic of social justice. Like an old war horse going back into battle,

Garnett put together one of the finest programs I have ever seen, with eloquent and involved spokespersons for such causes as feeding the poor, housing the homeless, combatting racism, dealing with illiteracy, helping Latin America, and caring for persons with AIDS.

Unfortunately, the series was poorly attended. My suspicions were confirmed, that most of the members of our churches who have plenty and are comfortable with their lifestyles prefer not to get involved with the dirtier side of the mission of Christ. Several of those who did attend were offended by speakers who suggested that Mexicans are as good as Americans, that child abuse occurs in well-to-do homes as well as poor homes, that migrant workers have the right to organize for collective bargaining, and that AIDS victims did not in fact "get what they deserved" and should now receive the loving care of Christians regardless of their sexual preferences.

As a teacher of preaching who once believed that superlative sermons are the answer to Christendom's woes, I find myself returning repeatedly to the observation of Dean W. R. Inge of St. Paul's in London, that "preaching is like trying to fill a row of narrow-necked bottles by throwing a bucket of water over them." How well Inge knew! Even the preaching of Jesus did little to change the attitudes and lifestyles of multitudes of people he confronted in his day. The powers of evil are well entrenched in the world, and words often appear impotent to unseat them.

I have been often astounded to hear some church member -- or officer! -- who has sat under my preaching and praying about the kingdom of God utter the most prejudiced or uninformed opinions about persons of other races or social conditions than their own.

At my last annual meeting of the congregation in the Los Angeles church, a member of the board of trustees stood and delivered himself of an oration to the effect that the church should stop funding organizations that assist the poor and spend all its money, which amounts to

millions of dollars a year, on its own building and programs for its members. I was ashamed and embarrassed for our church. I was ashamed and embarrassed for myself, to think that I had been this man's pastor for three years and he still thought as he did.

But that is where Christendom is on this matter, and we should make no mistake about it. There are many who have heard the message of Christ and understand the priority of social issues in trying to proclaim the gospel. To them, we owe the marvelous progress that has been made in denominational policies, in the overall social climate of our times, and even in the attitudes of government about world peace and human welfare. But there are still multitudes of Christians who are right where I was when I was a younger man, insisting on the importance of personal conversion without any particular recognition of a social component to that conversion.

What is the answer? In the final analysis, only God has the answer. But God has entrusted to us the stewardship of the gospel -- the real gospel -- and must work to fulfill it. We must continue to preach and pray and write and persuade others of the priority of social reformation in Christ's agenda, and must submit ourselves to a reordering of life and resources that will include in God's blessings all of those who have for whatever reason been excluded from them.

I admit that the burden of this more recent understanding of mine has not been an easy one. I no longer eat a good meal without thinking of people in Ethiopia who are starving to death. I no longer sit in my beautiful home by a cozy fire without remembering people who sleep on open grates to keep warm. I no longer stand to preach in a church or go to a lecture in a classroom without imagining migrant workers who work in the blazing sun or people who have no work at all to which they can go. But it is this understanding -- or one larger and infinitely better informed -- that led Christ to



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join us in our humanity and eventually to die on a Roman cross.

Now I am committed to it, and cannot imagine the gospel without it.