

The Compassionate Life

THE SOCIAL JUSTICE TRADITION (the Compassionate Life) is not a set of pious exercises for the devout, but a trumpet call to a freely gathered people who seek the total transformation of persons, institutions, and societies. We are to combine suffering love with courageous action. We are to stand against all oppressions and for all liberations. We are to become the voice of the voiceless, pleading their cause in the halls of power and privilege. The authors in this section on social justice show us the way.

William Temple and John Woolman both saw themselves as agents of change in their societies. Woolman called people off the “desire of wealth” in order to “break the yoke of oppression.” Temple saw the method of change to be twofold: clearly articulate “Christian principles” and “then pass on to Christian citizens, acting in their civic capacities, the task of reshaping the existing order in closer conformity to the principles.”

John Wesley warns us of the “sins of omission” whereby we fail to do the good that we can do. Hannah Whitall Smith urges us to serve not out of the “Must I?” of duty but the “May I?” of love. Jeremy Taylor counsels, “Never be ashamed of your birth, of your parents, your occupation, or your present employment, or the lowly status of any of them.” And Elizabeth O’Connor takes up the hard issue of money, urging us to reclaim for “ourselves the energy with which we have endowed money.”

Two authors in this section—Catherine of Siena and Dietrich Bonhoeffer—deal with Christian community. Catherine helps us see how God’s people, the Church, “is there to serve the bread of life and blood lest the journeying pilgrims, my creatures, grow weary and faint on the way.” And Bonhoeffer teaches us that “Christianity means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ. No Christian community is more or less than this.”

All these authors write out of lived experience. We have much to learn from each one.

William Temple

The Church's Impact upon Society

INTRODUCTION TO THE AUTHOR

William Temple (1881–1944) was born in The Palace, in Exeter, the son of Frederick Temple, who later became the archbishop of Canterbury. Educated at Rugby and at Balliol College, Oxford, he was a Fellow lecturer in philosophy at Queen's College, Oxford, from 1904 to 1910 and the chaplain to the archbishop of Canterbury from 1910 to 1921. He then served as bishop of Manchester, 1921–28; archbishop of York, 1928–42; and archbishop of Canterbury from 1942 until his death in 1944.

Many have considered Temple an outstanding leader of modern Protestantism. He was regarded by all who knew him as a great, yet humble, man. His premature death prevented even greater accomplishments, but he managed to influence multitudes of people through his lecturing, preaching, and writing.

He was a pioneer of the ecumenical movement and a tireless church reformer. He gave excellent leadership to Christian social movements and stood as a prophetic voice to the world. He once said, "In our dealings with one another let us be more eager to understand those who differ from us than either to refute them or press upon them our own tradition."

The following selection addresses a very important issue: the role of the Church in society. In it, Temple shows his keen insight into human nature and social structures.

EXCERPTS FROM *Christianity and Social Order*

1. The Church's Impact upon Society

The method of the Church's impact upon society at large should be twofold. First, the Church must announce Christian principles and point out where the existing social order is in conflict with them. Second, it must then pass on to Christian citizens, acting in their civic capacities, the task of reshaping the existing order in closer conformity to the principles.

At this point, technical knowledge and practical judgments will be required. For example, if a bridge is to be built, the Church may remind the engineer that it is his obligation to provide a safe bridge, but is not entitled to tell him how to build it or whether his design meets this requirement.

A particular theologian may also be a competent engineer, and in this case he may be entitled to make a judgment on its safety. But he may do so because he is a

competent engineer, and not because he is a theologian. His theological skills have nothing whatsoever to do with it.

2. Christian Principles

This is a point of first-rate importance, and it is frequently misunderstood. If Christianity is true at all, it is a truth of universal application; all things should be done in the Christian spirit and in accordance with Christian principles.

“Then,” say those who want reform, “produce your Christian solution for unemployment.” But there neither is nor could be such a thing. The Christian faith does not by itself enable its members to see how a vast number of people within an intricate economic system will be affected by a particular economic or political idea.

“In that case,” say those who want to uphold the status quo, “keep off the turf! By your own confession you are out of place here.” Here the Church must reply, “No; I cannot tell you what is the remedy. But I can tell you that a society with chronic unemployment is a diseased society. If you are not doing all that you can to find the remedy, you are guilty before God.”

The Church is likely to be attacked from both sides if it does its duty. It will be told that it has become “political” when in fact it has merely stated its principles and pointed out when they have been breached. The Church will be told by advocates of particular policies that it is futile because it does not support theirs. If the Church is faithful to its commission, it will ignore both sets of complaints and continue as far as it can to influence all citizens and permeate all parties.

3. In the Center of Our Own World

We are dealing here with Original Sin, the least popular part of traditional Christianity. It may be expressed in simple terms as follows: Our standard of value is the way things affect us. Each of us takes our place in the center of our own world. But I am not the center of the world, or the standard of reference between good and bad. I am not, but God is.

In other words, from the beginning I put myself in God’s place. This is my original sin. I was doing it before I could speak, as has everyone else. I am not “guilty” on this account because I could not help it. But I am in a state, from birth, in which I shall bring disaster on myself and everyone else unless I escape it.

Education may make my self-centeredness less disastrous by widening my horizons. But this is like climbing a tower which widens the horizons of my vision while leaving me still the center of reference. The only way to deliver me from my self-centeredness is by winning my entire heart’s devotion, the total allegiance of

my will to God—and this can only be done by the Divine Love of God disclosed by Christ in his life and death.

4. No Such Thing as a Christian Social Ideal

Political issues are often concerned with people as they are, not with people as they ought to be. Part of the task of the Church is to help people to order their lives in order to lead them to what they ought to be. Assuming they are already as they ought to be always leads to disaster.

It is not my belief that people are utterly bad, or even that they are more bad than good. What I am contending here is that we are not wholly good, and that even our goodness is infected with self-centeredness. For this reason, we are exposed to temptation as far as we are able to obtain power.

The Church's belief in Original Sin should make us intensely realistic and should free us from trying to create a Utopia. For there is no such thing as a Christian social ideal to which we should try to conform the society we live in as closely as possible. After all, no one wants to live in "the ideal society" as depicted by anyone else.

Moreover, there is the desperate problem of getting there. When I read a description of the Ideal Society and think how we might begin transforming our own society into it, I am reminded of the Englishman in Ireland who asked an Irishman, "Which way to Roscommon?" "Is it Roscommon you want to go to?" said the Irishman. "Yes," said the Englishman, "that's why I asked the way." "Well," said the Irishman, "if I wanted to go to Roscommon, I wouldn't be starting from here."

Although Christianity supplies no ideal, it does supply something of far more value, namely, principles on which we can begin to act in every possible situation. It is to these principles I now want to turn our attention.

5. Not with Man, but with God

All Christian thinking must begin not with man, but with God. The fundamental conviction is that God is the creator of the world which could not begin or continue except by his will. The world is not necessary to God in the same way God is necessary to the world. If there were no God, there would be no world; if there were no world, God would still be what he is (presumably about to make the world). For God is impelled to make the world because of his love. The world is not necessary to God, but it results from his love.

In making the world he brought into existence vast numbers of things, like electrons which always have to obey his law for them and do so. But he made creatures—men and women—who could disobey his law for them and often do so. He did this in order that among his creatures there might be some who answer his love with theirs by offering to him a free obedience.

This involved a risk in that they would naturally take the self-centered outlook on life, and then, increasingly become hardened in that selfishness. This is what has happened. To win them out of this, he came on earth and lived out the divine love in human life and death. He is increasingly drawing us to himself by the love thus shown.

Lord Acton, who knew more history than any other Englishman of the last generation, deliberately declared: "The action of Christ who is risen on mankind whom he redeemed fails not, but increases." But this task of drawing all people to himself will not be complete until the end of history. The kingdom of God is a reality here and now but can be perfect only in the eternal order.

6. Our True Value

The fundamental facts about human beings are two: first, we are made "in the image of God"; and second, that image has been stamped upon an animal nature. Between these two there is constant tension resulting in perpetual tragedy.

Our dignity is that we are children of God, capable of communion with God, the object of the love of God—displayed to us on the Cross—and destined for eternal fellowship with God. Our true value is not what we are worth in ourselves, but what we are worth to God, and that worth is bestowed upon us by the utterly gratuitous love of God.

All of our lives should be ordered and conducted with this dignity in view. The State must not treat us as having value only in so far as we serve its end as totalitarian States do. The State exists for its citizens, not the citizens for the State. But neither must we treat ourselves, or conduct our lives, as if we were ourselves the center of our own value. We are not our own ends. Our value is our worth to God, and our end is "to glorify God and enjoy him forever."

7. The Image of Holiness and Love

We are self-centered, but we always carry with us abundant proof that this is not the whole truth about our nature. We have to our credit both capacities and achievements that could never be derived from self-interest alone.

The image of God—the image of holiness and love—is still there, though defaced. It is the source of our aspirations. It is even—because of its defacement—the source of our perversities. It is capable of response to the Divine Image in its perfection. It enables us to see "the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ," and so "with unveiled face, reflecting as a mirror the glory of the Lord," we may be "transformed into the same image from glory to glory."

That is our destiny. And our social life, so far as it is deliberately planned, should be ordered with that destiny in view. We must be treated as what we actu-

ally are but always with a view to what in God's purpose we are destined to become. For the law, the social order, is our schoolmaster to bring us to Christ.

BIBLE SELECTION: ROMANS 13:1-7

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you wish to have no fear of the authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive its approval; for it is God's servant for your good. But if you do what is wrong, you should be afraid, for the authority does not bear the sword in vain! It is the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be subject, not only because of wrath but also because of conscience. For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, busy with this very thing. Pay to all what is due them—taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect is due, honor to whom honor is due.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

The following questions can be used for discussion within a small group, or used for journal reflections by individuals.

1. The method of the Church's impact upon society should be twofold, according to William Temple. First, the Church should make its principles known, and second, the Church should equip its members to reshape the existing order. In your opinion, how well has the Church done in achieving these two goals?
2. Any political involvement by Christians, notes Temple, will be attacked from two sides: one side will say that Christians have no business in political matters, and the other side will tell Christians that their efforts are futile. How have you experienced this opposition in your attempts to take a stand politically?
3. Temple is careful to point out that there is not only a responsibility but also a limitation for those Christians who wish to make an impact on the public square: Christians are not necessarily equipped to have all the answers to all the questions. What, then, can Christians say?
4. If you were to begin all your political thinking from God's viewpoint, as Temple suggests, how might you look at certain issues differently than you do now?

5. Look up Romans 12:2. Reading that verse in conjunction with Romans 13:1–7, what are some of the things you might be both responsible for and limited in doing?

SUGGESTED EXERCISES

The following exercises can be done by individuals, shared between spiritual friends, or used in the context of a small group. Choose one or more of the following.

1. Examine an important political issue this week. Read the editorials in your newspaper to clarify the differing opinions, but read them with Temple's counsel of looking at the issue from God's vantage point.
2. While Christians are not, by virtue of their faith alone, experts in every field, they are on solid ground when they combine their faith with their area of expertise. Ask yourself how your beliefs and your vocational skill might work together for the common good.
3. Treat everyone you meet this week with the dignity he or she deserves as a person who is created in the image of God.
4. Paul encouraged the Romans to live peaceably under the existing government, seeing the government as ministers of God. While this counsel does not prevent us from speaking for or against certain causes, it does presuppose a certain attitude that we should adopt, even when we protest. This week strive to make a difference in the world around you, but go about your task with courtesy and respect.

REFLECTIONS

The really big idea in this essay of Temple's is that the social order is to be influenced and shaped by a Christian ethical and moral environment. This is to be done by a clear articulation of Christian principles rather than through a specific political agenda.

And what are these Christian principles? Let me list a sampling: the supremacy of the law of love, the reality of original sin, the infinite value of all human life. It is easy to see how these, along with others, could help shape life in the public square.

—RICHARD J. FOSTER

GOING DEEPER

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