

**The Bible, the Church, and the Poor:  
Faith and Commitment to Social Ministry**  
(3 of 3)

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## Faith and Commitment to Social Ministry (3 of 3)

Yesterday we were speaking of justice in the New Testament, and I concluded by saying that, although we had spoken much about sharing of resources in the church in the New Testament, it was still necessary to see how that related to the issue of justice beyond the confines of the church community, and that in order to do this we would have to reflect on the significance of the assertion that the church is an eschatological community.

It is clear that most of what the New Testament says about sharing of economic resources refers to sharing among brothers and sisters in the faith. That is the nature of the *koinonía* depicted in the early chapters of Acts. The sharing takes place among those who have been "added" to the faith community. It is also true of the *koinonía*, which is the basis for Paul's collection for the poor in Jerusalem.

In contrast to all that, when we speak in modern times about "economic justice," we speak, not only of justice in the church, but also and even primarily about justice in the society at large, or even about justice among nations.

I do not know how it is in your church, but in mine there are many who feel that, since the New Testament speaks of economic justice almost exclusively in terms of justice and sharing among brothers and sisters in the faith and because the Old Testament also speaks almost exclusively

about justice among the children of Israel, they have little to say about economic justice in general societal and even global terms, as the question is posed today. From their perspective, all this talk about *koinonía* sounds too much like the "Christian yellow pages," that is, like a scheme whereby Christians protect and help each other, without too much consideration for what it might mean for society at large. To them, to speak about sharing within the church, or of economic justice within the church, is an ecclesio-centric cop-out that acts as if only the church's problems were important, and the rest of the world can go on along its merry way of injustice and exploitation.

What they would like the church to do would be to forget about justice within itself, to look at the world, to see all the injustice and all the suffering that exist in it, and to set out to do something about it.

I must confess that I find this sort of social activism very attractive and that there are times when I wish that such were the mission of the church as far as justice is concerned. In other words, that the church's task was exactly the same as that of any political action committee, with the sole difference that this would be a lobby for economic justice.

On the other hand, there are those in my own church who take the opposite tack. For them the task of the church is to witness to the gospel --by which they mean to convert people. The church has no business getting involved in economic issues, especially since such issues are

often controversial, and controversy is the last thing you want if the good name of the church is to be preserved, and its testimony is to be accepted.

These two views conceive of themselves as radically opposed to each other. In our shorthand jargon, one group is said to stand for social action and the other for evangelism.

Yet, as I look at the New Testament and at the theology and practice of the early church, it seems to me that these two positions are closer to each other than they imagine, and they are both wrong!

What both views have in common is that both miss the eschatological dimension of the church, and both reduce it to a pragmatist tool that is to be employed to achieve something else. This is typical of Western North Atlantic pragmatism, in which one no longer asks what something is, but rather what something is for. If it is not *for* something, if it is not a tool or a means by which to achieve something else, it might as well not be. Hence the debate between the social action pragmatists and the evangelism pragmatists: "the church exists *for* social action," says one group. "No," replies the other, "it exists *for* evangelism."

The truth of the matter is that the church does not exist for social action, nor does it exist for evangelism. The church exists by the power of the Holy Spirit. The church certainly has tasks, and among such tasks are social action and evangelism.

But the reason why the church exists is not those tasks.

Let me give you one example of what I mean. The New Testament repeatedly speaks of the church as the body of Christ. Most commonly we understand this in the sense that the church is the tool through which Christ acts, like we act through our bodies. Thus, we come up with phrases such as "he has no hands but our hands, no feet but our feet." Apart from the fact that such phrases come very close to blasphemy, they completely miss the main point of the image of the church as the body of Christ. The main point is not what we can do for Christ as his body. The main point is rather what Christ has done and is doing for us by incorporating him unto himself, like a body unto a head. The point is not, as in that famous quote, that Christ is absent, and we must act in his stead. The point is rather that he lives and that because he is the head and we are the body, we, too, shall live. The point is not that this body of his, which is the church, has the task of going around creating a new world. The point is that he has already created a new humanity, a humanity that is the sign of God's purposes for all of humanity, and that by his grace we have been made part of it.

The church is the eschatological people who exist because, in Jesus Christ and in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the end has begun. The church exists because, as Peter put it, "this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel."

This, however, does not make the matter of the management and sharing of economic resources less important but rather more. If the church existed for the purpose of doing economic justice, and somehow it fell short of that purpose, we would say that it had failed, and it was necessary to try again, and try harder. But if the church exists by the action of the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit is a spirit of justice, truth, and sharing, then to violate the nature of the church is to violate the Spirit.

That is the point of the strange passage on Ananias and Sapphira. Obviously, the root of their action is a combination of envy and greed. They envy the good reception that Barnabas's gift has received; yet their greed does not allow them to act with equal liberality. They, therefore, connive to sell a property and to lie as to its value. What they do, they do because of greed. Yet, Peter does not confront them with their greed or lack of generosity. On the contrary, he says quite explicitly that they had no obligation to sell their property, nor to give away all the proceeds from the sale. What Peter confronts them with is lying. Lying to the church and thereby lying to the Spirit. And they die, like those in ancient times who dared lay hands upon the sacred ark of the covenant.

To say that the church is an eschatological community is to say that it is a first installment of the Kingdom, a sign of God's purpose for the world. It is also to say that the church witnesses to the world as to that divine purpose, not only by speaking but also and primarily by *being*.

It is also to say --and this is what, as a person with clear activist tendencies, I find most difficult-- that the church's most radical social action, more radical than lobbying before congress, more radical than organizing an armed revolution, is to *be* the church. But really to *be* the church. Not to play at being the church. Not to act more or less as if we were the church. But to *be* that eschatological community, which by its mere existence, by the quality of love and of justice within itself, puts to shame the powers-that-be, questions the social order, subverts the unjust structures of oppression, or, as the book of Acts says, turns the world upside down.

(Eschatology means that we live, not from the past, but from the future.)

In I Corinthians there is an interesting passage that merits careful consideration. Paul says that whenever we eat the bread and drink the cup, we proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. What does this mean? Some have interpreted the passage as meaning that we proclaim the Lord's death to each other. Others have spoken of proclaiming the Lord's death to the principalities and powers that witness our celebration of communion. If you look at the entire passage, however, there is much more than this at stake. Paul is speaking to the problem of injustice in the church. He is dealing with the problem of some who come to the Supper, bring their own food, and gorge themselves, while others go hungry. To eat of the Lord's Supper in this unjust way is to eat unworthily. It is not to discern the body of Christ, which is made up of all these various people, rich and poor, and which is a *koinonía*, a body of sharing. Therefore, whoever thus eats of the bread and drinks of the wine, eats and drinks judgment. On the other hand, when we truly and faithfully eat and drink of the bread and the wine, as the body of

Christ that we are, without unjust distinctions, as a body in which there is neither Jew nor gentile, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female, by the very act of eating and drinking together, by the very act of *being* the body of Christ, we announce his death and give witness to him.

Thus, justice, sharing, *koinonía* is of the very essence of the church. We either practice it and thereby witness to the Lord of the church, or we abandon it, and thereby eat and drink judgment for ourselves.

This connection between justice and witness is quite clear throughout the New Testament, even though we often miss it. Take for instance the first six verses of Acts 6:

Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists murmured against the Hebrews because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution. And the twelve summoned the body of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. Therefore, my brothers and sisters, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word." And what they said pleased the whole multitude, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands upon them. (Acts 6: 1-6)

The book of Acts begins with the account of Pentecost. We all remember how the Holy Spirit was poured on all who were present, and they overcame the barriers of culture and language, and they gave witness to the mighty acts of God. It then moves on to describe the life of the

early church: how they witnessed, how they broke bread together with joy, how they shared in all things.

But not everything is rosy. By the fifth chapter we come across the episode of Ananias and Sapphira, who lied to the church and paid dearly for it. Now, in the sixth chapter, we come to another difficult situation. There is "murmuring" in the church because the widows of the Hellenists were being neglected in the daily distribution.

In order to understand this passage, several things need to be clarified, however briefly.

First, the "Hellenists" and the "Hebrews." Actually, they are all Jews. But apparently some are Aramaic-speaking Jews from Palestine, and the others are Jews with connections with the diaspora, many of whom have picked up Hellenistic custom and language. The Hellenists are looked upon with suspicion by many of the more orthodox Jews. Their faith and religious practice may not be entirely orthodox. And this has even political consequences, for there may even be the possibility that the god, who in ancient times responded to infidelity by turning the people over to the power of the Philistines, may now be responding to similar infidelity by supporting the power of Rome. If regular Jewish Christians were regarded with suspicion by those whom Luke called the "rulers" of Israel, Hellenistic Jewish Christians were doubly suspicious. Indeed, it will be against them that persecution will break out immediately after the text we have read.

Then there are the Hebrews. Chief among these "Hebrews" were the twelve, those who had come with Jesus from Galilee. They were the traditional leadership. They had been with Jesus from the beginning. Some of them were related to each other. The cousin system at work in the early church? They were in charge of the daily distribution. Actually, in Acts 4 we have been told that when people sold properties, they brought the money and laid it at the feet of the twelve. So presumably the leaders of the distribution were not just any Hebrews, but the twelve, the original leaders, the old guard.

Given such a situation, it is not surprising that the widows of the Hellenists were being neglected in the daily distribution --whatever that daily distribution may have meant.

So, there was murmuring in the church. All is not well. At this point, the "Hebrew" leadership had a clear option, a most human and most natural option. They could say simply: "Who do these people think they are? They are latecomers. Let them be content with what they have. Take it or leave it. After all, we are already being sufficiently nice to them, and now they are creating problems for us."

Yet, they cannot really say that. They cannot say it, first of all, because they themselves are Galileans, and from the point of view of the Jewish establishment, a Galilean is just as much an outsider as a Hellenist. But the real reason why they cannot say it is that the problem had not been created by the Hellenists and their widows. The problem had been created by the Holy

Spirit, who on that day of Pentecost made that the Gospel be preached far and wide to all these strange people who were present in Jerusalem. The Hellenists were in the church, not because they forced their way into it. These Hellenistic Jews, and soon Gentiles of every culture and background, were in the church because the Holy Spirit has this nasty habit of tearing down human barriers. And thirdly, they could not dismiss the murmuring of the Hellenists, because the tables at which the daily distribution was made was not their table. The money laid at the feet of the apostles was not the apostles' money. It was the money; it was the table of the Lord. If you wish, read again the passage about Ananias and Sapphira. In lying, they were not cheating only the apostles. They were cheating the Spirit. Were the twelve to say: "This is our money; these are our resources; this is our table," they too would be cheating, stealing from the Lord.

The problem was not created by the Hellenists. The problem was created by the Spirit, and either the church deals responsibly with it or it ignores the work of the Holy Spirit.

What that early church does is remarkable. If the twelve had been leaders in my own denomination (I do not know about yours) they probably would have asked that a token Hellenist be named to help them with the distribution to the Hellenist widows. But they did much more than that. They created a new structure for the administration of the daily distribution. By the names of the seven whom they elected, it appears that they were all

Hellenistic Jews. They all have Greek names. Indeed, of one of them, Nicolaus, we are told, was not even a Jew by birth.

This was a courageous and unexpected thing to do. In fact, it soon led to persecution. Yet Luke tells us that as a result of this bold decision "the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem."

If this were all that Luke tells us, it would already be a remarkable sign of the strange way in which the Spirit works among us. But there is more.

The twelve decided that they will give to these seven the administrative tasks and that they will reserve for themselves the ministry of the word. But even this was not enough for the Spirit, who had other ideas. Were we to continue reading the book of Acts, we would find that, immediately after the passage we read, we are told that Stephen, one of the seven elected to manage the financial resources of the church, was giving witness, first with his speech, and then with his own life. In the next chapter, it is Philip, also one of the seven, who took up the ministry of the word. And then we pick up on Paul's conversion, and we are off on the mission to the Gentiles and ultimately to us.

Without even intending to do so, the early church made this possible by responding to the murmuring of the Hellenists. By empowering the Greek-speaking element in the church, they

opened the way for the mission, first to other Greek-speaking Jews, then to the Gentiles, and ultimately to us.

The twelve had a very limited vision of the mission of the church. They did not need a full vision of all that the Spirit would do in the future in order to be obedient in their own time. And yet, because of their obedience in their own time, a new future that they did not even suspect was opened to the church and eventually to us. They knew that injustice was not to be tolerated in the community of the Spirit, and that was enough. But because they knew this and acted upon it, new horizons were opened to that community.

Time has passed, and we are constantly facing similar situations. The very fact that we are having this gathering shows that there are various groups in the church tell us that we are not being entirely fair in today's equivalent of the "daily distribution." They are challenging the church to be the church. It is possible to ignore them. To remind them that they are latecomers, and that by all human standards they should be content with what they have. To make token gestures towards them. To find a dozen ways to tell them that their presence is a problem.

Or, on the other hand, it is possible to acknowledge that the problem is not with them. The problem is that as a church we live by a Spirit who has the uncomfortable habit of creating this sort of problem, of bringing in strange people, of making us sisters and brothers to such people, of inviting us to serve and to partake at a table that is not our own. And for that we are

thankful, for were it not for that uncomfortable habit, that indescribable grace of our God, none of us would be here. We are here because the Spirit is inclusive, and we are here because long ago that early church was willing to do justice to the murmurings of the Hellenists. And, if we will but be obedient to the Spirit today, only the Spirit knows what avenues of mission will be opened for the future.

