



Christian Faith and Economic Justice

Jesus says: “Sell your possessions and give to the poor” (Luke 12:33). Acts describes how the early believers carried out this instruction (Acts 2:45). Paul writes that affluent Christians must be “rich in good works, generous and ready to share” (1 Tim. 6:18). John warns that God’s love does not live in anyone who refuses to help brothers and sisters in need (1 John 3:17).

In response to God’s gracious salvation in Christ and empowerment by the Holy Spirit, Christians through the ages have responded to these teachings with acts of compassion and generosity. Those with few possessions have often been the most generous. Annual surveys of Christian charity have found that believers with limited means give a significantly larger percentage of their income than more affluent Christians.

Mennonite missionaries, MCC workers and short-term mission visitors recount innumerable stories of the generosity of people who are called “poor.” They tell of dining with impoverished families who, in order to honor their foreign guests, serve a chicken dinner that would have been their holiday feast. They note how African villagers give any extra food to their neighbors, who in turn share with them in their own time of need.

These sisters and brothers inspire all of us to let ourselves to be stretched in Christ-like compassion. But our response need not be limited to individual acts of generosity. The Old and New Testament Scriptures address more than individual responses to people in need. They call believers to be a corporate witness to the nations — a “city on a hill”— that models the just and compassionate practices of the reign of God.

What the church does first, the nations are expected to adopt and implement more widely.

Lessons from History

Many times in history, practices first embraced by followers of Jesus have been taken up as public policy. From the first century, for example, Christians organized programs to feed people who were hungry, whether Christian or not. By the year 250, Christians in Rome were feeding more than 1,500 hungry people every day.

The churches also used their offerings to establish orphanages, alms houses, income assistance programs, shelters and hospitals. These and other pioneering initiatives by people of faith eventually became adopted as institutions by whole societies. In this way the church truly serves as the light and salt of the earth (Matt. 5:13).

Historically, Christians have successfully advocated for legal and structural changes toward a more just society. The campaigns against slavery and the slave trade by England’s William Wilberforce and U.S. abolitionists are well known. Since England was the center for the world’s slave trade, its abolition in the late 18th century appears to have been an act against the country’s immediate economic interests.

Less familiar are the actions of visionary Christians like turn-of-the-century Toledo, Ohio, businessman and mayor Samuel Jones. As the owner of a successful manufacturing company, Jones paid a living wage, reduced the work day for his employees from 10 to 8 hours (without cutting their daily pay),

“We witness to the nations by being that ‘city on a hill’ which demonstrates the way of Christ. We also witness by being ambassadors for Christ, calling the nations — and all persons and institutions — to move toward justice, peace and compassion for all people.”

— from *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*, art. 23.

SCANDALOUS CHRISTIANS?

Christians created the first hospitals in the Roman world. This prompted the emperor Julian, an opponent of Christian faith, to begin establishing hospitals with public funds. He lamented the “scandal that ... the [Christians] care not only for their own poor but for ours as well; while those who belong to us look in vain for the help we should render them.

ECONOMIC FAIRNESS

The Apostle Paul expresses the moral imperative of economic justice by applying the lesson of the manna given to the Israelites in the wilderness. He writes, “The one who gathered much did not have too much, and the one who gathered little had no lack” (2 Cor. 8:1-15). The goal, Paul says, is “equality.” This refers not to mathematical equivalence, but to a “fair balance” in which all people have enough for lives of sufficiency, dignity and community participation.

introduced vacations with pay and pioneered employee profit-sharing. As mayor, he implemented Toledo’s first civil service system, expanded city relief programs for people in poverty and urged municipal ownership of public utilities.

During this same period, other Christians concerned about social and economic justice became leaders in the campaigns for laws to upgrade working conditions and end child labor, improve public education, and provide better care for the mentally ill. Fifty years later African-American churches became the vanguard of the movement for civil rights. The resulting legislation included economic justice provisions prohibiting discrimination in employment, bank lending, real estate transactions and access to public accommodations.

God’s Word on Systemic Injustice

Scripture addresses systemic, not just individual, issues of economic justice. The Law of Moses called for debts to be canceled and slaves to be freed every seven years (Deut. 15). Every 50th year an equitable redistribution of land was to be carried out (Lev. 25). The Law also included many other public legal provisions for just economic relationships (e.g. Lev. 19, 25; Deut. 14, 16, 24). Isaiah censures monopolistic practices that deprive people of their homes and livelihood (Isa. 5:8-10). Amos condemns exploitation of the poor through unjust institutions (Am. 2:6,7; 4:1; 5:12). James denounces the wealthy who defraud their employees (James 5:4). And Jesus himself promises a great re-ordering in which the positions of the rich and poor will be reversed (Luke 16:19-3; Luke 6:20-31 and 1:52-53).

Church and State

The church models alternatives and calls the nations to correct systemic injustices and replace them with policies and practices that approximate more closely the reign of God. When we pray in the Lord’s Prayer, “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven,” we are praying, in part, for more just economic relationships.

Government is one tool that people can use to advance economic justice. Governing authorities are charged with defending the rights of the poor and rescuing the vulnerable from their oppressors (Prov. 31:8,9; Ps. 82; Dan. 4:27). They are called to be God servants on behalf of human well-being (Rom. 13:1-6). Governments have sometimes acted according to this biblical calling. They have sought to regulate and supplement the market economy in ways that rescue, protect and empower ordinary people, lifting people struggling to overcome poverty.

Still, every day 30,000 children die of preventable or treatable poverty-related illnesses. Clearly, we are not acting justly and stewarding the world’s economy as God intends. But there is nothing inevitable about this tragedy. Fifty years ago many more children were needlessly dying. These deaths have been reduced because people have acted together in governmental and non-governmental efforts of compassion and justice. Recently, however, malnutrition, disease and child mortality are increasing again in many places.

Echoing Jesus’ statement about the Sabbath (Mk. 2:27), we can confidently proclaim that “the economy exists to serve people, not people to serve the economy.” If the economy is unjust, it can be altered more in the direction of God’s will. After all, the redemptive power of Jesus Christ is at work in the world!