

The Church's Social Concerns: Scriptural Imperatives and Limitations

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The church's social concerns, what are they? Are there scriptural imperatives that make social concerns the direct responsibility of the church? Does Scripture set limitations on the church's social concerns? The topic assigned for this Forum is to explore these questions.

But we ask: What are the social concerns the church is to have? Or to put it another way: What social concerns have been assigned to the church in one way or another according to man's way of thinking? They can be divided into two categories that are convenient for our discussion. The one is social ministry, the other, social action. This is the division that is used in the book, *The Church's Social Responsibilities*, by Dr. Martin Scharlemann. The church's social ministry he defines as "faith active in love, sensitive to the promptings and guidance of the Holy Spirit and responsive to human need. It is the arm of the church, both local and universal, extended in help toward that person who is referred to by our Lord as our 'neighbor.'"¹ The same author defines social action as "the corporate involvement of the church in shaping and reshaping political and social structures."² These two categories appear to be sufficiently broad to allow discussion of whatever someone may have claimed to be the church's social concerns. In line with this division, we shall consider the two points:

- I. Concern for the individual person's temporal well-being in society (social ministry);
- II. Concern for changing and improving the patterns, structures, and institutions of society (social action).

I

We begin by considering social concerns that must lie nearest to the hearts of those who are brothers and sisters in Christ. Christians will be concerned about the temporal well-being of one another, of their fellow low members in Christ. That the spiritual health of its members must be the concern of the church is beyond question and not a matter of consideration in this paper. But what scriptural imperatives are there for the church's concern for also the Christian's physical, outward life in this world, for his well-being in society? What is the church's involvement when its own are sick, destitute, widowed, aged, helpless, when a calamity strikes them, when an accident disables, when financial disaster brings ruin? Where do the church's responsibilities lie?

When we ask, "Where does the church's responsibility lie?" we are not asking about the responsibility of each individual Christian, but of their joint responsibility as they are gathered together as church. What are the scriptural imperatives or limitations that apply to the assembly of Christians, the *ekklesia*, and here we are thinking of the church as it manifests itself in, for example, a congregation or a synod? As God gathers Christians into these visible assemblies that can be called church, what social concerns does He impose on these church groups? What social concerns should the church have for its members? Our theme calls on us to examine what scriptural imperatives or limitations there may be.

Beginning with the former, there is the church's imperative to preach and teach. Our Savior, our Priest, Prophet, and King, has chosen to continue His prophetic office through His Christians, individually and corporately. Scripture calls on Christians not to forsake the assembling with one another, and the purpose of their gathering is to exhort one another (He 10:25). They are to appoint those who will proclaim to them the whole counsel of God, as did the apostle Paul. They are to choose men who may serve them as stewards of the mysteries of God (1 Cor 4:1). The Holy Spirit places bishops in the church so that the flock may be nourished

¹ Martin Scharlemann, *The Church's Social Responsibilities* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1971), p. 18.

² *Ibid.*, p. 47.

with the Bread of life, the Holy Word (Ac 20:28). When we speak of divine imperatives given to the church none compares with the command to preach the gospel to every creature. The prime responsibility of the church to teach and preach must remain beyond question.

The church, responsible to declare all the counsel of God (Ac 20:27), will not fail to teach its members what God's counsel is also regarding their life of sanctification. This means that it must teach its members what God's Word says about the Christian's concern for the temporal well-being of his brothers and sisters in Christ. This, too, is an imperative beyond contradiction.

God wants Christians to be known for the love they have for one another. "By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another," is the word of our Savior (Jn 13:35). Teaching Christians to love one another was not a mere afterthought, but John reminds his readers: "For this is the message that ye heard from the beginning, that we should love one another" (1 Jn 3:11). In fact, John points out that love to God is unthinkable unless there is love for the brothers in Christ: "If a man says, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar; for he that loveth not his brother, whom he hath seen, how can he love God, whom he hath not seen?" (1 Jn 4:20). This the church must teach.

Love, which dwells in the heart, must express itself in deeds. "But whosoever hath this world's good, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him?" (1 Jn 3:17). John is speaking of a brother's temporal needs that can be satisfied by the worldly goods of the more fortunate Christian. Failure to help reveals a heart void of love for God. This the church must teach.

In fact, what is done for the least of Christ's brothers is reckoned by our Savior as done to Him. These works will be brought to remembrance in the judgment. Jesus will say: "I was an hungered, and ye gave me meat; I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink; I was a stranger, and ye took me in; naked, and ye clothed me; I was sick, and ye visited me; I was in prison, and ye came unto me" (Mt 25:35–36). That is not to say that Christians carefully record and remember all their works of love. Works of self-righteousness are noted and remembered by the doer. He wants to boast of them, if not to others, then to himself. Jesus speaks of works of love, performed by the Christian as a natural, self-evident action of his new man so that he later asks: When did we do all this? Christians must express their love for God by works of love to their brothers in Christ. A good tree will bear good fruit. This the church will teach.

There is a clear imperative in Scripture assigning to the church this teaching responsibility. And that includes teaching its members social concern.

There is now the further question as to what extent the church should set up and administer the agencies and thus provide direct opportunities for those whom it teaches to carry out their acts of concern for fellow members. Has God established the church as an institution for the express purpose of administering the agencies of social concern among its members?

If we look for a direct imperative comparable to the command to teach and preach the gospel, we shall look in vain. There are, however, numerous examples in Scripture where the church did administer social programs. While these cannot be considered imperatives directing the church to its specifically assigned mission, they show that there may be circumstances under which the church will recognize also such administrative responsibilities as being incumbent on it. Consider the examples.

As soon as a congregation was gathered in Jerusalem, "all that believed ... had all things common; and sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need" (Ac 2:44–45). This appears to have been a way the wealthier members helped provide for those who were less fortunate or may even have been suffering genuine want.

When in the daily distribution of foods the Grecians murmured against the Hebrews that their widows were being neglected, the apostles suggested a solution. A new office was established in the church, that of deacon, to administer this program in the church more efficiently without distracting the apostles from their work of preaching the Word. The distribution was not simply dropped as something that the church should not concern itself with at all. The administration was made more efficient.

Paul's concern for the poor in Jerusalem led to a major collection in Achaia and Macedonia (Ro 15:25–27; 1 Cor 16; 2 Cor 8 and 9). The machinery for this collection was set up by the churches, and Paul himself served in bringing this offering to the recipients in Jerusalem. It was the church that administered this major effort that lies in the area of social concern for fellow Christians.

Thus the church may set up the machinery through which Christians can help one another when that is needed. This is not prohibited. At the same time, there is no direct command to the church as institution to do this, like the command to preach the gospel.

We have been speaking about concern for the church's own members, the brothers and sisters in Christ. Does what has been said apply also to people in the world at large? In its teaching role the church must proclaim concern for the needs of all people. The love of the Christian is to reach out, not only to those of the household of faith, but to men everywhere. This our Savior taught so well when He responded to a certain lawyer's question: "And who is my neighbor?" (Lk 10:29). The parable of the good Samaritan shows that the first question when seeing a human being in need is not: Is this a member of the ELS, FAL, or WELS? Nor even, is this a fellow Lutheran, or fellow Christian? Rather, where there is human need, Christian love will respond. It reaches out, recognizing every man in need as his neighbor. So we hear St. Paul teaching the Christians in Galatia to "do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith" (Ga 6:10). They should use the opportunities given them for such expressions of Christian love. "As ye have therefore opportunity," he says. While the superlative *malista*, "especially," places a priority on concern for those "of the household of faith," this does not place a restriction on his basic statement, "do good unto all men." Concern for the well-being of man, of all people in the world, the church must teach its members. It must teach: "Thou shall love thy neighbor as thyself."

As far as administering a program that will concern itself with all men, I know of no example in Scripture such as we have in the case of the church's own members. However, when we consider what the church is to teach its members, there may be circumstances under which it may see the need or the advisability of setting up agencies to help the members do what is being taught. Scripture has no prohibition against this. In Christian liberty the church may decide on the best course to follow. Yet for the church to set up machinery for social ministry to people in general appears less pressing than to serve its own members.

But now, what about limitations? Are there any scriptural limitations to what we recognize as concerns the church should have for the welfare of its members as well as of people in the world in general? We shall use the word "limitations" in a rather broad way, not including only direct prohibitions but also warnings, or what might be called limiting guides, as the church carries out its responsibility.

In both its teaching and administering functions, the church must keep its priorities clear. If in its teaching role sanctification takes precedence in importance to justification, there is something wrong in priorities. Such teaching can easily degenerate into moralizing and work righteousness. Teaching the whole counsel of God also means keeping everything that is taught in its theological perspective. It means teaching law and gospel, sin and grace, justification and sanctification in their proper relationship to one another. It means not stressing one to the virtual exclusion of the other.

It appears, however, that in its active functioning the church is most in danger of confusing its priorities. When Satan sought to mislead our Savior into placing top priority on the needs of his body, and they were evident after forty days of fasting, Jesus' response was: "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God" (Mt 4:4). The bread of life for the soul has priority over bread for the body. The church, too, in its activities must remember the word of its Lord: "But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you" (Mt 6:33). Christ's word, "What is a man profited if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul" (Mt 16:26), can also show the church where its priorities must lie as it functions in the world. The ministry of the Word must retain priority over any social ministry. Spiritual concerns have priority over social concerns.

Today the church is being told that there are no such priorities. This is happening under the misleading statement that it is the church's responsibility to minister to the whole man. Any division in concern, we are told, is based on a false division of man into soul and body, one that has crept into Christian thinking from

Greek philosophy. The conclusions find expression in statements such as these: “Social ministry is part and parcel of our Christian ministry along with the preaching of the Gospel and the teaching of people.”³ “The church has a mission not only to the whole world but also to the whole man, to each individual, and that not only spiritually but physically.”⁴ The church is told not to think “that we do our Lord’s will most profoundly when we verbalize the Gospel and conclude that it is less important to bring help and hope to the poor, the hungry, and the naked in their distress.”⁵ These statements from LC-MS periodicals are in line with the Mission Affirmations adopted by the Missouri Synod in 1965. The church is called on to consider the ministry of the Word and social ministry equally the church’s responsibility. This forgets the priorities God has set up. It forgets that the church has been assigned the unique responsibility of preaching the gospel through a direct, divine imperative. There is no such imperative for any other function of the church.

After attaining a position of equality in the church, social ministry threatens to assume a position of priority. That which concerns itself with what is tangible and has direct application to the here and now often seems so much more important than what may be considered a vague, spiritual hope for the future. It is often said that you cannot talk about eternity to someone who has a less than happy and prosperous temporal existence. Such thinking points to the priority of social ministry. That in a particular crisis the priority of immediate temporal help may be called for cannot be denied. It may be necessary to gain time for the church’s ministry of the Word to find application. We are not, however, thinking of such extreme, critical circumstances. Too readily the church’s priorities simply receive a general reversal. One has every reason to wonder about the priority at the recent ALC convention (Oct. 9–15). The convention theme was “Ministering to a hungry world.” The theme was not aimed at those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, as one might hope, since it was the theme of a church convention. A convention preview stated that the agenda included a resolution “calling for ‘sacrificial efforts’ to help solve the world hunger crisis.” It was announced that “delegates will act on a world hunger resolution endorsing the naming of an ad hoc committee ‘to give leadership and direction to the church’ ... in helping the people who are hurting because of malnutrition and starvation.”⁶ In all fairness it should be stated that the same convention was to hear a report of the United Mission Appeal, an appeal “for ‘new money’ beyond normal congregational giving” that “will provide funds for mission projects at home and overseas.” Yet the question can be asked whether the convention theme does not indicate a shift in priorities.

When the church retains the proper priorities in its work, it will avoid divorcing social ministry from the spiritual. Stated positively, this means using the opportunities which social ministry provides for gospel proclamation. The man sick of the palsy was not simply told to take up his bed and walk. He was first assured of the forgiveness of his sins. Jesus recognized this greater need of his and used the healing as evidence that He had the power to forgive (Mk 2:10–11). Stephen was not stoned for distributing food to the widows, but in his ministry as a deacon he proclaimed Christ with great effectiveness. When the people who had witnessed the miraculous feeding of the five thousand wanted to use force to make Jesus their king, a king who would so wondrously administer to their physical needs, Jesus “departed again into a mountain himself alone” (Jn 6:15). The priority to give His life a ransom for many did not dare to be replaced or even muddled by the impression that His was simply a ministry of social concern. John wrote about the signs Jesus performed “that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name” (Jn 20:31). He saw that Jesus used His power to heal, for example, not simply to relieve human suffering but to authenticate His person and word and work. Let the church not forget its priorities.

A warning is in place also against joining in social ministry with those who clearly use this ministry in the interest of promoting religious error or in the service of a false religion. Paul’s warning words come to mind: “Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers; for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? And what communion hath light with darkness? And what concord hath Christ with Belial? Or what part hath he that believeth with an infidel?” (2 Cor 6:14–15). That a church cannot join with others in

³ *The Lutheran Witness*, (Feb. 13, 1972), p. 10.

⁴ *Concordia Theological Monthly* (Sept. 1969), p. 545.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 547.

⁶ *Lutheran Standard* (Sept. 17, 1974), p. 13.

social service which clearly promotes what is in violation of the gospel and God's Word will be recognized as self-evident. But should not the church also warn its members against such association? We recognize the problem this poses in some of the major campaigns like that of the United Fund, a fund that includes charities the Lutheran Christian cannot conscientiously support. The solution may not be simple when employers "force" such support via payroll deductions. This does not mean, however, that the problem should simply be ignored. Opportunities to show social concern are so numerous that a choice can be made to support such as do not violate a conscience bound by God's Word of truth.

We see another limitation on the church's social ministry in the fact that according to Scripture the church is not the primary institution the Lord calls on to help those in need. The first responsibility rests on the family. Jesus sees this as enjoined by the Fourth Commandment. He criticized the scribes and Pharisees for nullifying this commandment by saying, "Whosoever shall say to his father or his mother, it is a gift, by whatsoever thou mightest be profited by me; and honor not his father or his mother, he shall be free. Thus have ye made the commandment of God of no effect by your tradition" (Mt 15:5-6). In line with this, Paul instructed Timothy: "But if any provide not for his own, and specially for those of his own house, he hath denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel" (1 Tm 5:8). Thus the church is not to be burdened where there is a family that can provide. Paul continues some verses later: "If any man or woman that believeth have widows, let them relieve them, and let not the church be charged, that it may relieve them that are widows indeed" (1 Tm 5:16). He would restrict the church's direct assistance to those who have no family to provide for them.

In this connection it needs to be recognized that our society provides programs that assist families in meeting the needs, especially of those who are no longer gainfully employed. Regardless what our political views are, whether we favor social programs on the part of government or not, the fact is that a family through its taxes is providing at least to a degree for its own and for the country's aging, widows, orphans, or disabled. Numerous agencies invite contributions for programs aimed at relieving suffering, sickness, and need. This is quite different from the society in which the church found itself in the first century. If families are able to provide for their own in our society through these various means, we cannot say: That is wrong, it must be done through the church. The church will step in where the family's help is lacking or insufficient.

In Luther's day there was much begging, both on the part of the poor and on the part of mendicant orders. In his treatise "To the Christian Nobility" he did not ask the church to solve this problem. He wrote: "Nobody ought to go begging among Christians. It would even be a very simple matter to make a law to the effect that every city should look after its own poor, if only we had the courage and the intention to do so.... Every city should support its own poor, and if it was too small, the people in the surrounding villages should also be urged to contribute, since in any case they have to feed so many vagabonds and evil rogues who call themselves mendicants."⁷ Luther might be quite surprised to see how widely his advice has found application.

This brings us back to the church's primary function, that of teaching and preaching the will of God as revealed in the Scriptures. This is its specifically assigned role and one assigned to it alone. If it fails here, there is no other institution of God on earth to take its place. When it comes to administering help for the temporal well-being of its members and of people in general, it has a secondary responsibility, helping as directed by the needs it faces. Failure on the part of the church to recognize its divinely given priorities can only result in eternal harm to men and unfaithfulness to the church's Lord.

II

We proceed to our second point. Does the church of Jesus Christ have the responsibility directly to effect changes and improvements in the structures and patterns of society? Has God gathered Christians into church groups for the purpose of social action?

The social gospel unequivocally gave this assignment to the church. When Washington Gladden (1836-1918), a Congregationalist who is often called the father of the social gospel, wrote the article on "Philanthropy

⁷ *Luther's Works* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), XLIV, 189f.

in America” for the *New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, he described not so much how things were as how he thought they ought to be. He wrote: “True philanthropy is not merely remedial. It seeks to discover and remove the causes of misery. And the Christian Church has, for society as well as for the individual, not only a message of redemption, but also a message of regeneration . . . its most important work, after all, is to give us a new heaven and a new earth wherein dwelleth righteousness.”⁸ A Baptist who died in the same year as Gladden, Walter Rauschenbush (1861–1918), became “the most articulate, passionate, and influential exponent of the social gospel on the American scene.”⁹ The building of an ever more perfect society on earth was a logical goal at a time when evolutionary presuppositions were gaining ever wider acceptance. Man was on the way up to increasing perfection. Surely the responsibility of the church was to help man in the climb. A New York Methodist minister said with enthusiasm: “We will make our towns and our cities the right kind of places so that everybody will be a Christian as a matter of course. When it used to be hard to be good, it will become difficult to be bad.”¹⁰

The bullets and bombs of World War I punctured this optimistic balloon of the social gospel. Neo-Orthodox theologians like Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, and in America Reinhold Niebuhr saw the fallacy of this optimistic view of man. But the balloon seems to have been patched again even if it has lost some of its gas so that it cannot rise as high as was once hoped. The sights have been lowered rather than redirected.

What was called the social gospel now is called social action. While the social gospel promised to perfect the world and its societal structures, social action seeks their improvement. In either case, the church’s social concerns are said to extend to changing and improving the patterns, structures, and institutions of society.

The question under our theme now is: Are there imperatives in Scripture that make this the responsibility of the church? Then, too, are there limitations God places on this?

Are there imperatives? Those who hold social action to be the church’s responsibility, we would think, must find such imperatives in Scripture. It may be of interest to see what they are and examine their validity.

This does, however, present some difficulty. Those who assign to the church a heavy responsibility in the area of social action are not greatly inclined toward citing chapter and verse of Scripture in proof of their claims. Henry Whiting, for example, the author of the article “Social Welfare in the Lutheran Church” in *The Encyclopedia of the Lutheran Church*, cites the usual references when speaking of the social ministry of the church, of *diakonia*. There we find Matthew 4:23, Luke 10:25ff, Matthew 25:31ff, Acts 6:1ff, 2 Corinthians 8 and 9. These references to Jesus’ healing ministry, to the good Samaritan, to Jesus’ words on the day of Judgment, and the *diakonia* in the early church do, as we noted, tell us something about the social ministry of Christians and the church. But when it comes to social action, no specific references are made. In his summary, the reference to the good Samaritan is hardly meant as biblical proof for the position presented when he writes: “The church of Christ as it travels along the road to Jericho will minister to the man who falls among the thieves but it will also strive to make the road safe and secure for other travelers.”¹¹ Such scriptural allusion can, however, give the impression of providing a scriptural basis for what is asserted.

Most often, biblical support is sought through broad references to creation, to the universal priesthood, and to the church’s prophetic responsibilities corresponding to the role of the prophets in Old Testament Israel. Whiting writes: “Certainly the church bears the duty of speaking to the state as the prophetic voice of God as it preaches his Word in Law and Gospel in the contemporary social situation.”¹² Again: “If the church is to be true to its role as the body of Christ, it must bring his prophetic and redemptive Word to the whole of society.” We can agree with this if it is meant to refer to the command to preach the gospel to every creature. But that is not exactly what Whiting is thinking of. He continues: “If the totality of man is the object of God’s redemptive grace then the totality of society must be the object of that grace . . . All of this requires that the church develop programs of social education and social action. The church, therefore, will seek to build a society in which

⁸ *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1959), X, 477.

⁹ *The Encyclopedia of the Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1965), III, 2197.

¹⁰ John Horsch, *Modern Religious Liberalism* (Chicago: The Bible Institute, 1924), pp. 129f.

¹¹ *Encyclopedia of the Lutheran Church*, III, 2214.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 2214.

people have the opportunity to develop to the fullest capacity God's given endowments, and make their maximum contribution."¹³ Notice how the idea of universal redemption is turned into an imperative for social action. However, the concept of redemption is changed in the process.

One of the points made in the LC-MS Mission Affirmations of 1965 is that "The Church Is Christ's Mission to the Whole Society." Under this heading Martin Kretzmann in his "Report of Mission Self-Study and Survey," on which the Affirmations were based, says: "As the body of Christ in the world, the community of the new creation, the church has a corporate responsibility towards the structures of society."¹⁴ However, this entire section has no specific Scripture reference to show us where God assigns this responsibility to the corporate church, the body of Christ.

In 1969 two articles appeared in the *Concordia Theological Monthly* to support and encourage the fuller application of the Mission Affirmations. It was felt that since their adoption they had not had the practical impact that was expected. In his article Paul E. Jacobs stated: "So the servant Lord entrusts His church with a servant task to gather a broken world that it may be redeemed from its evil and restored as His world made whole and made the dwelling place of righteousness."¹⁵ This assertion was based on the fact that "all are the Lord's brothers, even those who are not yet in the fellowship of faith," and the fact that Christ died for all, with a reference to Jesus' words that "as much as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren (the hungry, the sick, the naked, and the imprisoned) you did it to Me." It appears that a passage that speaks of the Christian's personal *diakonia* is made to serve as a basis for the church's social action.

Later Jacobs says of the church's youth: "They want it (the church) to be a fellowship that seeks to help people by dealing with the great social evils which grind and tyrannize people ... They are tired of always only talking about these problems. They want to do something—and we provide no channels for them."¹⁶ Here the desires of the youth are brought as the reason for the church to provide channels for social action. This is hardly a scriptural imperative.

William H. Kohn in his article in the CTM, referring to the church's responsibilities to go to all people, complains that we find it difficult to reach across cultural or economic lines. Correctly understood, this complaint has biblical basis in the general mission command. But then Kohn continues: "Much less do we think of ourselves as being in mission to the very structures of society."¹⁷ Here there is a confusion between the church's mission to proclaim the gospel to people throughout the world and an assumed mission to the whole world via social action.

It appears then that efforts on the part of the protagonists of social action by the church have at times sought to find biblical basis in general conclusions drawn from broad references to certain doctrines, like those of creation, redemption, and the church's prophetic mission. At other times, terms like gospel, redemption, evangelism, repentance are used with a meaning quite different from what they have in connection with the biblical proclamation of sin and grace. Sometimes it seems that human voices accusing the church of failing society are held to be divine imperatives calling the church to social action.

Scharlemann, in the volume cited earlier, indicates that we cannot expect explicit reference to Scripture as the church takes up the task of social action. He writes:

The Holy Spirit is God's special gift to the church. He has the task of leading the people of God into all truth (John 16:13). Hence the church is that living community in which men are brought to a new understanding of the ways of God. As its members confront new problems, they are given more profound insights into what God expects of them in the light of His Word.

The fact that the New York convention (1967) adopted social action as a corporate task may serve as a case in point In recent years more and more Christians have been led to see that they must commit

¹³ Ibid., p. 2214.

¹⁴ *Convention Workbook*, Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, 1965, p. 118.

¹⁵ *Concordia Theological Monthly* (Sept. 1969), p. 546.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 548.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 271.

themselves not only to the work of helping persons in need but also to the task of attempting to alleviate such social problems as tend to depersonalize men and dehumanize society.¹⁸

It seems these new insights of the church “in the light of His Word” involve more □□□□□□□□ than □□□□□□□□.

Our study of the advocates of social action has yielded no scriptural imperatives that assign to the church the responsibility to improve or change the structures and patterns of society. The reason for this is that there are none. Scripture frequently tells the church to call men to repentance and faith in Christ and to the fruits of faith. But where does God command the church as church to address itself to government, or to society, with a message of social improvement? Where is the church assigned the task of preaching or developing civic righteousness in the whole of society? There are no such imperatives in Scripture.

The New Testament also provides no examples such as we have in the case of social ministry. Any references to the prophets and Old Testament Israel cannot find application to the New Testament church because of Israel’s unique role as a nation and its unique position under God. Here we must look to the New Testament church and what Scripture says of its role and function. And here we find no imperatives calling for social action nor examples of the church assuming such a role.

In fact, Scripture leads us into the other direction, to what we here call limitations. Jesus told Pilate, “My kingdom is not of this world” (Jn 18:36). Jesus’ rule was one that did not use worldly means nor have worldly goals.

Jesus clearly stated that He ruled through the power of the truth “To this end was I born and for this cause came I into the world that I should bear witness unto the truth. Everyone that is of the truth heareth my voice” (Jn 18:37). The truth to which He bore witness in the fullest sense is the truth of His Word, the gospel, sin and grace. He did not seek to gain an army of men bearing swords and staves for His defense. Even the sword of Peter was not to be drawn to hold off earthly enemies. Not the power of the sword, but the power of His truth, that is the means used in His kingdom.

Neither was the goal of His rule, His kingdom, of this world. The Jews tried to make it appear so. “We found this fellow perverting the nation, and forbidding to give tribute to Caesar, saying that he himself is Christ, a king.” “He stirreth up the people, teaching throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee to this place” (Lk 23:2, 5). Those were the accusations against Him. This was not, however, what Jesus was doing.

There were abuses and wrongs aplenty in the government Rome was providing for Palestine. Certainly the tax system was subject to gross injustice and exploitation. Yet Jesus in the context of paying taxes to Rome said: “Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s” (Mt 22:21). Jesus made no efforts to change the Roman system, to cast off the Roman yoke, oppressive though it was. Even his own trial by Pilate was lacking in justice. Pilate declared Jesus to be without fault and still did not release Him. Paul too would be detained in Caesarea unjustly by Felix in the hope that Paul might give him a bribe to secure his release. Social action would have called for Christ and His followers to do something about these evils which Palestine was suffering at the hand of Rome. Had Jesus been involved, the accusations of His enemies would have had substance. As it was, Pilate recognized the truth of Jesus’ words: My kingdom is not of this world.

Perhaps most objectionable to us in a time when personal freedom is becoming something of a fetish is the slavery that found support in Roman law. Slavery in those days too was recognized as an evil from which one should welcome deliverance. The laws of the Jews, given by God, provided for release in the year of jubilee. If social action is the responsibility of the church, one would think that this is an evil which the church at no time could have ignored, or tolerated. We would expect Paul to have called for the church to provide leadership toward the emancipation of all.

Paul’s advice to the Corinthians in the matter of slavery is no invitation to social action. He does not tell the congregation of Corinth to seek a change in their society, which permitted slavery, and to crusade for the freeing of all slaves. He does not tell the slaves to rebel against their masters, not even against those who were unjust. He does not tell them that they need not submit to a system that allows for a status that degrades the

¹⁸ Sharlemann, p. 17.

dignity of man. These are Paul's words: "Each one should remain in the situation which he was in when God called him. Were you a slave when you were called? Don't let it trouble you—although if you can gain your freedom, do so. For he who was a slave when he was called by the Lord is the Lord's freedman; similarly, he who was a free man when he was called is Christ's slave. You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of men. Brothers, each man, as responsible to God, should remain in the situation God called him to" (1 Cor 7:20–24, NIV). Paul is seeking to keep the priorities of his readers straight. The greatest blessing for the slave is not simply to secure freedom from his master. True, if it can be done lawfully, such a blessing is not to be despised. Nevertheless, the slave's greatest blessing is that, even while he continues as a slave, he in fact is a free man in Christ. No one can take this freedom from him. At the same time the free master remembers that in Christ he has become a servant. So let not this external status in which the Christian finds himself be his great concern. "Don't let it trouble you," Paul writes. You are bought with a price. Retain the freedom Christ gained for you. That is what is important.

Let the church never forget these priorities. The church has been called to serve the world, to minister to God's people in that which has true value and significance. Let it not expend its energy on that which while correcting external evils to a degree would still leave man in bondage to sin. Let not the church through programs of social action give the impression to men that this life after all is what really counts. There is enough in the world that would lead him to think thus. The church's whole energies are needed through the power of the Word to change the hearts of men so that in their individual lives they think according to and live by God's priorities.

But what about the church's responsibility to preach? What about its prophetic mission? Cannot this be brought to bear in the interest of social action? The church, we noted, has the responsibility to teach. And is not this possibly what is meant when it is said that the church is Christ's mission to the whole society?

Unless we think of the individuals who make up society, the term becomes something abstract. You cannot address yourself with a message to an abstract concept. It must be addressed to the individuals who make up society. Ultimately the church's prophetic mission is a mission to individuals. When it is said that the church must address itself to the whole of society, that would have to be understood to mean that the church must serve a prophetic function not only to its own members, but to the many individuals that are not its members, to the unbelievers in society.

This raises the further question: What must be the church's message to those in society who have not yet been brought under the gracious rule of Christ by faith? Should the church point to society's ills in the interest of changing those ills, improving society, thus improving civic righteousness? Is it to preach law for the sake of effecting improvement, to help make the road from Jerusalem to Jericho safer? That is the responsibility given by God to government, to apply the law as curb, to use the sword for the temporal welfare of man. The church has no call from God to apply the law as a curb on society as such. That would be a confusion of the roles assigned by God to the church and to government.

And certainly the church cannot address itself to unbelievers in society with the law as a guide. Only to those who already are Christians, motivated by the gospel, will this function of the law apply.

To the unbelievers—and the church will have to address itself to individuals and not abstractly to society as a whole—to unbelievers the church's one message is first to proclaim the law as a mirror, to reveal personal sin, to convict the unbeliever and show the condemnation of God that sin incurs. And when the law has produced the cry: What must I do to be saved? the church's reply must be as was Paul's: Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved. Sin and grace, the law as a mirror in the service of the gospel and the message of forgiveness in Christ, that is the content of the church's prophetic mission to the whole of society. And the goal is not the temporal correcting of social ills, but eternal life in the new heaven and new earth in which dwelleth righteousness. How can the church with such a message and such a goal abandon it even in part for a far lesser role that has not even been assigned to it?

All of this found clear expression in a forum where it may have caused some surprise and by a man from whom we might not expect it Archbishop Olaf Sundby, Primate of the Church of Sweden, presented a lecture on "Christian Ethics in a Secularized Society" at the annual Summer Theological Conference at St. Olaf

College. According to a press release he said: “The real mission of the Church is not social structure and political systems but salvation to people in this world... The church does not exist for moral reasons or improvement of the world in the first place; it exists in order to preach the Gospel of the forgiveness of sins... Good conditions in society, a good and true, just and free society, God can give to people in many ways through whom He desires. The good news of the forgiveness of sins, which gives a meaning to life and hope for the future to people in times of little hope, can only be given through the Gospel and the Church.”¹⁹ This is hardly the position of the Mission Affirmations. Missouri can learn from the Primate of the Swedish state church.

All of this does not deny that a society in which the church effectively preaches sin and grace and reaches out to the many unbelievers with this message will surely show the effects of that prophetic mission. The gospel as it takes over in the hearts of men will work as a leaven in society. The more Christian citizens there are who let their light shine, who do not fail to be the salt they are, the more will the church’s prophetic mission also affect the very structures, patterns, and institutions of society. But that is a by-product, an indirect result that must not become its assigned role. When it becomes the latter, the gospel is the loser. In fact, the whole world will be the loser because of an increasing lack of the gospel.

The Augsburg Confession, Article XXVIII, clearly defines the responsibility of the church and of civil authority, lest they be confused. God has assigned to each its role and provided each with the means to carry out its assignment. Some statements from this article can help keep our thinking clear. On the one hand we read: “For the civil government deals with other things than does the Gospel. The civil rulers defend not minds, but bodies and bodily things against manifest injuries, and restrain men with the sword and bodily punishments in order to preserve civil justice.”²⁰

On the other hand, the mission of the church is also clearly defined: “The power of the Church has its own commission, to teach the Gospel and to administer the Sacraments. Let it not break into the office of another; let it not transfer the kingdoms of this world; let it not abrogate the laws of civil rulers; let it not abolish lawful obedience; let it not interfere with judgments concerning civil ordinances or contracts; let it not prescribe laws to civil rulers concerning the form of the Commonwealth.”²¹ We add: Let it not presume to change the structures, patterns, institutions of society.

We find no scriptural imperatives for social action. There are scriptural limitations, limitations which are more in the nature of prohibitions, summed up in our confession by the words: Let the church not break into the office of another.

We conclude by summarizing the chief points of this presentation in eleven brief statements.

1. The church has the direct commission from the Lord to teach and preach the whole counsel of God from Holy Scripture. This includes teaching its members social concern for one another as part of their life of sanctification.
2. The church may according to the example of the New Testament church set up and administer agencies through which Christians may express their social concerns for their fellow Christians.
3. The church will teach its members to do good unto all men and may in Christian liberty administer a program which reaches out to the needs also of those outside the fellowship of faith.
4. The church must not lose sight of God-given priorities in its work. Its spiritual ministry must always have priority over any social ministry.
5. The church will use opportunities which social ministry provides for gospel proclamation.
6. The church is not to join in social ministry with those who use it to promote error or a false religion.
7. The first responsibility to help those in need rests on the family. This in our society is often carried out through government and numerous other agencies.
8. We find no imperatives assigning to the church a role in social action, notwithstanding the claims of its protagonists.

¹⁹ *Lutheran World Federation News Release*, quote in *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* (Oct. 1974), p.302.

²⁰ *Concordia Triglotta* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1921), p. 85.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

9. Jesus' kingdom was not of this world and did not direct itself toward correcting the structures of society.

10. The church's only prophetic mission to those outside the fellowship of faith is a call to repentance, exposing sin and its consequences through the law and proclaiming forgiveness through the gospel. This is its God-given mission to the whole of society.

11. As Christ rules in the hearts of more and more men in a society this will as a by-product effect improvement in the structures, patterns, and institutions of that society.