

**Editor's note:** The following two essays by Calvin Van Reken and Peter Vander Meulen were initially presented orally by the two authors as opening statements in a panel discussion to faculty and students at Calvin Theological Seminary on 10 December 1998. With slight modification, they are provided here as a contribution to an important ecclesiological discussion about the church's social responsibility.

## The Church's Role in Social Justice

*Calvin P. Van Reken*

Let me begin by calling attention to a distinction that is essential to thinking clearly about the issue of the church's engagement of social issues: the distinction between the church as an *institution* and the church as an *organism*. This distinction is between two ways of thinking of, or conceptualizing, the church, and thus two ways of speaking about it. Neither one of these ways is right and the other wrong, nor one proper and the other improper—they both have their legitimate use.

One can think of the church as an institution, or the *mater fidelium* as Berkhof calls it. The church as an institution is formal organization that sets out to accomplish a specific purpose. It is an agent. It can do things; it can say things; it has its own voice. As an institution, it has its own purposes and plans, its own structure and officers, and its own mission. It has its own proper sphere. In many ways it parallels other institutions, like governments or schools. Working for the church makes you a church worker, and the work you do is church work. (Note that not all work done by Christians is church work.)

One can also conceive of the church as an organism, or the *mater coetus* as Berkhof calls it. This is to consider the church as the body of believers, the communion of believers. *It differs from the institutional church in that it refers to the church, not as a unified organization, but rather as an aggregate of individual believers.* In this aggregate, each Christian is, of course, a personal agent. Each Christian has a purpose and a call in God's plan. Each has a vocation, a calling, whether it is as a plumber, a teacher, or a politician.

From this also follows a distinction between *church work*, which is the work that a Christian does as an agent of the institutional church, and *kingdom work*, which is the work that a Christian does in service of his Lord—but not as an agent of the institutional church.

## The Christian's Involvement in Society

The question for this article is *not* whether individual Christians or groups of Christians may or should address social issues. Of course we should. Each Christian should take his or her beliefs and values into the public arena and apply them to the important social issues of the day. This is a significant part of kingdom work.

Part of our responsibility as Christians is to exercise our compassion and love for others in tangible ways. Christians should feed the hungry, comfort the sorrowing, and visit the sick. As part of their kingdom service, Christian plumbers plumb since there will not be any leaks in the kingdom. In kingdom service, Christian teachers teach in the sure hope that while now we see darkly, one day we will see face to face, and in that day there won't be any ignorance. As kingdom workers, Christian truckers truck because in the kingdom the good things God has created need to be distributed far and wide.

Also, individual Christians can singly, or through Christian organizations, address the government for solutions to problems that are within the government's proper sphere. One of the simplest ways we in the West carry out this responsibility is to vote for those persons whom we believe will address the problems of the day effectively. Working through Christian organizations, such as Bread for the World or the Center for Public Justice, Christians attempt to influence government policies for the good. Christians are called to be responsible, compassionate, law-abiding citizens.

But these are our responsibilities as individual Christians, or as groups of Christians, and they are all kingdom responsibilities. As each of us carry out his or her civic responsibility before God, it is extremely important that we not confuse what we are saying and doing with church work, for reasons that I will shortly make clear.

## The Church's Involvement in Society

Now I will turn to the issue of the institutional church and social justice, which is the main issue of this article.

The primary work of the institutional church is not to promote social justice, it is to warn people of divine justice. Its primary business is not to call society to be more righteous but to tell persons of the righteousness of God in Jesus Christ. Its primary work is not to tell us who to elect to public office, it is to tell those in every nation of the One who elected many for eternal life. The primary work of the institutional church is to open and close the kingdom of God and to nurture the Christian faith. This it does primarily through the pure preaching of the gospel, the pure administration of the sacraments, and the exercise of church discipline.

This is not to say that the institutional church should *never* promote social justice or speak out on behalf of the victims of injustice. There are times during

which the institutional church must speak out about social injustices. The institutional church should articulate, in broad terms, the proper goals that social policy should promote. For example, the church should speak out and work for a society that protects all its citizens against acts of violence.

But normally, the church should not take it upon itself to entertain the political question of *how* a particular society can best achieve this goal. That is, the institutional church should, in general, avoid policy statements. Regarding social violence, is gun control a good idea, or will it simply arm only criminals? Are more police officers the best idea, or bigger jails, or mandatory sentences, or some combination of these? The truth is that these are questions that are beyond the institutional church's expertise as a church.

My view is that the institutional church should speak out against preventable poverty but, in most cases, must not recommend exactly which social policies will best reduce poverty. For example, what kind of public assistance, if any, is best, or is private welfare the better option? This is a question that the institutional church as such is not in a privileged position to answer. No doubt individual Christians have their opinions, but I believe that it is taking the Lord's name in vain to claim divine status for your political judgment.

If I decide to vote for some particular political candidate, then that is my decision before God, and I am accountable to him for it. But it is quite a different thing for the council of a congregation to tell its members that voting for that candidate is the Christian choice. If I protest the new welfare rules and write a letter to my congressman with reasons why they are unwise, then that is my decision before God and I am accountable to God for it. But it is a quite different thing for me as a pastor to preach in a sermon that the church stands opposed to welfare reform.

So, the institutional church may outline the broad goals or ends of social policy but normally should not endorse specific policy proposals. However, on some occasions, the church should speak out against a particular social policy. It should do so when the policy is clearly immoral. A policy can be immoral either because the goal of the policy is evil, as in the case of ethnic cleansing, or because the policy is itself immoral, although the goal is morally desirable. Legalized abortion may be one way the government hopes to reduce poverty, a worthy intent, but the church ought to oppose abortion and speak out against it. And so it has. The Christian Reformed Church through its synod has officially spoken out against legalized abortion on several occasions.

It is my opinion that when a synod, rather than some denominational committee or worker, speaks out against some social injustice, it helps guarantee that the specific policy is *clearly* immoral. I do not mean, of course, that moral truth is decided by majority vote. My claim is not ontological. Rather, it is merely epistemological: A significant difference of opinion among Reformed Christians regarding a policy issue is evidence that the morality of the issue is not clear.

## Two Dangers

Now consider the two dangers the church must avoid if it tries to address all and only clearly immoral social policies. The first is that it will fail to address all the clearly immoral policies, and so will be silent when it should speak out. In South Africa, some churches failed to speak out against the clearly immoral policy of apartheid. A second, even worse danger, is that a church will speak out and defend the wrong side of the moral issue. When this happens, the church is complicit in the injustice, as happened in some U.S. churches who opposed civil rights for African-Americans.

The church *is* in a privileged position with respect to knowing what is clearly morally permissible and what is morally impermissible, for it has God's written Word. Thus, it should speak out on the clear moral injustices of the day. The truth is, however, that most political issues, in the Western world at any rate, are debates between two or three morally permissible policy options. Choosing among such options requires a kind of worldly wisdom to which Christians as such have no special claim.

Finally, let me give one more reason why the institutional church should be reluctant to enter into the political and social arguments of the day. The reason is this: It tends to compromise the primary work of the church. It does so in two ways. First, it saps energy and resources out of the primary work. Second, it creates a mental association between the institutional church and some political agenda. There are churches that I would not consider attending on a regular basis, not necessarily because their theology is mistaken, but because I associate them with a political agenda with which I personally take issue. To link the cause of Christ with specific social policies that are not morally obligatory seriously impedes the primary work of the church. For these reasons we ought to resist the temptation to use the institutional church as a mouthpiece for our political convictions.

## Summary

First, individual Christians are called to be responsible, compassionate, law-abiding citizens.

Second, the institutional church should speak out on the general goals that a society should pursue. It should speak out when the social goals being pursued are evil, as with so-called ethnic cleansing. It should speak out against clearly immoral policies even when they are intended to achieve morally acceptable ends.

However, with respect to the vast majority of political options (whether for or against certain social policies or for or against certain political candidates), the institutional church should keep quiet. It has no privileged knowledge that allows it to choose between these, and, when it does so anyway, it impedes the accomplishing of the primary mission of the institutional church.

Finally, on those clearly moral matters when the church should address a social problem or policy proposal, the church should do so officially in and through its ecclesiastical assemblies. When the issue that must be addressed is national or international, it should be addressed through Synod, not through the denominational board of trustees or some office in the denominational building.

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## The Church and Social Justice

*Peter Vander Meulen*

I've spent most of my working life with the Christian Reformed World Relief Committee (CRWRC) in positions overseas—Bangladesh, the Dominican Republic, West Africa—and from that perspective, I want to reflect on the world of the poor in the light of my Reformed heritage and my relationship to Christ.

### Assumptions

I want to start by making explicit seven key assumptions on which I base my thesis:

Number one: The basic tenets of Reformed doctrine are given and are more or less commonly understood.

Number two: The gospel is truly holistic and conveys a saving, reconciling grace not just for human souls but indeed for ourselves as integral beings—indeed, for all of creation itself.

Number three: All of God's created images are entitled to respect and to dignity—all creation groans for a restored relationship with its creator—whether it acknowledges that or not.

Number four: The church of Christ lives out a paradox: We are called *out* of the world even as we are called to be *in* the world.

Number five: The Bible, and Christ in his ministry, repeatedly holds up the poor and those the world considers of no account as having great value. And he explicitly holds them up as his surrogates among us now, and as having a claim upon us because of his care for them.

Number six: Even as good progress has been made in overcoming hunger and poverty in some parts of the world, any hunger and misery in a world with sufficient food for all is a scandal.