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The Church's Witness in Evangelism and Social Praxis

Nigel Biggar

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This carefully worded and tightly packed argument is worthy of careful study. The author's call for a balanced and coherent commitment to the understanding and praxis of the Church in mission demands both our individual and church-in-community response.
Editor

WHAT IS THE CHURCH'S MISSION?

A major focus of conflict in the Church of England was recently highlighted in a report on industrial mission.[1] On the one hand, it observed, there are those engaged in industrial

[1] *Industrial Mission—An Appraisal*, The Report of a working party commissioned by the Industrial and Economic Affairs Committee of the Church of England's Board for Social Responsibility, BSR, London 1988.

mission who believe that the Church's primary calling is to support communities in their struggle for social justice, regardless of their religious convictions. On the other hand, there are those in the rest of the Church, especially the parishes, who see her mission primarily as that of enabling spiritual conversion.

The report specifies this conflict as one between the practioners of industrial mission and those responsible for parochial ministry.[2] But it is in fact much broader, running through most reaches of the Church; and it is of course, neither confined to the Church *of* England nor to the Church *in* England. Still, it is particularly poignant that on the very eve of the Decade of Evangelism there should be in the Church of England such debilitating disagreement over what the mission of the Christian p. 297 Church is, over what the Church is for, and over what it is that Christians are called to do.

It is the three-fold aim of this essay, first, to identify the concerns that characterise the opposing positions; second, to clarify the controversy by distinguishing the crucial issues from the tangential ones; and finally, by addressing those crucial issues, to offer an account of the Church's mission that pays due attention to both sets of concern.

I. IDENLIFYING OPPOSITE CONCERNS

First, then, what are the concerns? Why is it that some feel driven to identify the Church's mission with social action? And why is it that others find this so objectionable?

Mission as Social Praxis

There seem to be at least three reasons why some see the Church's basic duty as that of promoting just community in society as whole. One is that they have lost confidence in the characteristic truth claims of traditional Christianity. They no longer believe in a God who has acted uniquely and decisively in Jesus Christ to save the world. They see Christianity as one of several culturally-conditioned ways to God, and they regard its traditional claims to special status as insupportable, even immoral. Moreover, given the overriding moral imperative of preventing global nuclear holocaust and the strife between human communities that would kindle it, these religious pluralists argue that the 'truth' of a religion is to be measured by the extent to which it fosters social praxis; that is, active commitment to the task of building just community. Orthodoxy divides; orthopraxy unites.[3]

A second reason for identifying the Church's mission with social praxis is the belief that religion is virtually reducible to social morality. This was the conviction of the social gospel movement, which was originally a late nineteenth and early twentieth century American phenomenon. Unlike contemporary pluralists, the apostles of the social gospel did believe in the uniqueness of the Christ-event, albeit in Schleiermacher's terms and not

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Sadly, the follow-up paper, *Church and Economy: Effective Industrial Mission for the 1990's*, BSR, London, 1989, which was intended to develop and stimulate discussion on the issues raised by *Industrial Mission*, is entirely devoted to organisational concerns. Theological issues were supposed to have been reserved for the complementary paper, *Ministry and Mission Examined: Stories and Reflections on Industrial Mission Today*, BSR, London, 1989. This, however, lacks all trace of awareness of the fundamental theological conflict identified by *Industrial Mission*. Only *Church and Economy* reached the General Synod for debate.

[2] *Industrial Mission*, pp. 43–4.

[3] For arguments along these lines see the essays in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, ed. John Hick and Paul Knitter, SCM, London, 1987.

those of classical orthodoxy.[4] p. 298 However, they inherited from Kant a strong anti-pietistic inclination to regard the specifically 'religious' dimension of Christianity—the dimension of prayer and worship—as an immoral distraction from the performance of moral duty which is the substance of genuine religion. Then, under the influence of Albrecht Ritschl, they specified the building of God's Kingdom here and now in the form of a more just and democratic society as the most Christian and most urgent moral duty.[5]

The third reason for making social praxis the main business of the Church is apologetic. For when faced with human beings suffering injustice, how else can the Church maintain her integrity except by committing herself to overcome it? How else can she preserve the credibility of the gospel of God's costly love for the world? This apologetic concern was a major cause of the genesis of Liberation Theology.[6] The context of its birth was the long history of economic exploitation and political oppression in Latin America, in which the leadership of the Church (i.e. predominantly the Roman Catholic Church) had tended to play a conservative role, virtually sanctioning the unjust status quo. When this conservative stance was contrasted with the readiness of others, especially Marxists, to risk their lives in trying to combat injustice, the Church's reputation and the gospel's suffered grievously. Liberation Theology, then, emerged as an attempt to rescue Christianity's credibility by showing that the Church of Christ cares enough to put itself at risk in the struggle to overcome oppression and exploitation.

We have now adduced three reasons why some regard social praxis as the heart of the Church's mission: first, because they believe that it is the main measure of the truth of its beliefs; second, because they believe that it is the real point of the Christian religion; and third, because they see it as necessary to the integrity of the Church and so to the credibility of its witness to the gospel of Christ. Now we shall turn p. 299 to the other side of the debate, to those who deny that social praxis should take first place on the Church's agenda. What are their driving concerns?

Mission as Spiritual Concern

There are at least three. First, they are concerned to uphold the truthclaims of traditional Christianity. They believe that traditional Christian assertions about the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, the divinity of Christ, his definitive revelation of God's character, and God's act of atonement through him, are true claims and that there are good reasons for believing them. Therefore they deny that the 'truth' of Christianity can be measured simply by the criterion of social praxis. It should also be measured by the logical coherence of its metaphysical claims and by their empirical and historical grounds. This brings them into conflict with religious pluralists.

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[4] The Christ-event is unique, according to Schleiermacher, in the sense that the absolute God-consciousness which is communicated through the corporate life of the Christian community was original to Jesus. See *The Christian Faith*, T & T Clark, Edinburgh, 1928, Second Part, Second Aspect of the Antithesis: Explication of the Consciousness of Grace, First Section.

[5] In one of the classics of social gospel literature, Walter Rauschenbusch's *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, Abingdon, Nashville, 1945), there is no discussion of the spiritual disciplines of prayer and worship, and in the chapter on the sacraments, baptism and the Lord's Supper are given an exclusively social significance. We are told, for example, that baptism was originally 'not a ritual act of individual salvation but an act of dedication to a religious and social movement' (p. 198); and that in inaugurating the Lord's Supper, Jesus intended to create 'an act of loyalty which would serve to keep memory and fidelity alive' (p. 202).

[6] See, for example, Enrique Dussel, *Ethics & Community*, Liberation & Theology 3, Burns & Oates, London, 1988, pp. 220–21, where Liberation Theology is described as a form of 'fundamental' theology, that is, 'self-justifying' or apologetic theological discourse.

Their second concern is to preserve the distinctive importance of the religious or spiritual dimension. In opposition to the proponents of the Social Gospel, therefore, they deny that the Christian religion finds its real substance simply in morality, whether personal or social.

Their third concern has to do with the meaning of 'social praxis'. 'Social praxis' usually means something more specific than 'social responsibility'. It means an active commitment to the cause of social justice. Further, it is usually assumed that this commitment involves resistance to the economic, social, and political status quo; and the status quo is usually taken to consist primarily in certain social structures. Further still, resistance is often understood to include the use of violence. So those who object to the identification of the Church's mission with social praxis do so partly because they doubt that the Christian Church should avail itself of violent means to fulfil its social responsibility.

II. CLARIFYING THE CRUCIAL ISSUES

We turn now from the concerns that fuel the debate over the place of social praxis in the Church's mission to the task of distinguishing the crucial issues from the tangential ones. We shall do so in two steps. In the first we distinguish the issue of the missionary role of social praxis from that of the reduction of the Christian religion to social praxis. There are many who believe that social praxis is integral to the Church's mission, but who do not believe that is all that Christianity is about. Many Liberation theologians for example, are theologically P. 300 orthodox. They take for granted the classical Christological claims about Christ's divinity and therefore classical trinitarian theology. They acknowledge that Christianity makes claims about God's redemptive activity as well as about right political behaviour. So the debate over the identity of Christianity between the theologically orthodox on the one hand and religious pluralists on the other, is in principle quite distinct from the debate about the place of social praxis on the Church's agenda. We shall concentrate exclusively on the latter.

In the second step we distinguish the question of the missionary role of social praxis from that of the propriety of the use of violent force. It is perfectly possible consistently to advocate the missionary priority of active commitment to social justice and against unjust structures without endorsing the use of violence. The question of the use of violent force by Christians is in principle a distinct one, which is strictly tangential to the issue which concerns us. Therefore we shall pass it by.

Now that we have sharpened our focus, let us proceed directly to address the issues upon which the matter of the missionary role of social praxis turns. There are (predictably) at least three of them: what is it that God works to save us from? how should the Church bear witness to the gospel of God's saving activity? and what should we understand social justice to mean? We shall take each in turn.

Salvation as spiritual and social

First, from what has God acted in Jesus Christ to save us? The traditional answer, of course, is 'sin'. When we talk of 'sin' as distinct from 'a sin' we refer, not to a particular wrong act, but to a more basic wrong disposition or orientation. Moreover, we refer to a quite distinct species of wrong disposition, one that is specifically religious. In the first place, 'sin' characterises the relationship, not between one human being and another, but between human beings and God. It refers to the human rejection of God either because of proud self-assertion or because of an anxious refusal to trust. On this account, therefore,

salvation is primarily about the overcoming of this estrangement of humanity from God. It is about God's reconciliation of humankind to himself. It is about the divine atonement.

Sometimes, however, those who put social praxis at the top of the Church's agenda seem to think of sin only in its secondary, social manifestations. Likewise, they think of salvation only in its secondary sense of the putting right of the distortions which sin introduces into human relationships and institutions. So, for example, some Liberation theologians virtually collapse 'sin' into 'offence against the neighbour', p. 301 and 'salvation' into 'liberation' from economic, social, and political oppression.[7] One of the reasons for this 'secularisation' of the concept of salvation is undoubtedly opposition to the pietistic abstraction of the religious relationship from its social context. But it is surely unnecessary, as well as theologically disastrous, to affirm the moral and social significance of salvation by collapsing it into its secondary sense. One can affirm a very intimate connection between spiritual and social salvation without abolishing the distinction. This is what the Christian tradition has done from the beginning in arguing that love for God—or, if Luther is preferred to Augustine and Aquinas, faith in God—causes love for the neighbout. Even if one chooses to go further and specify love for the neighbour in terms of social praxis, there is no logical reason why one could not still retain the priority of faith or *caritas*.

So why do some Liberation theologians decline to settle for this traditional description of the connexion between the religious relationship and secular ones? In some cases, the reason is an oddly unqualified subscription to the Marxist doctrine of economic determinism, according to which economic relationship determine all others. The lack of qualification is odd because it is hard to see how anyone can believe in economic determinism and remain confessionally committed to Christian theology. For if economic structures lie at the root of what is wrong with the world, then 'salvation' must lie simply in the economic reorganisation of society. The question of the status of one's relationship with God loses all immediate relevance to the problems of temporal life. Therefore insofar as Liberation theologians endorse the doctrine of economic determinism, we can only conclude that their eagerness to stress the power of economic interests to deform human relationships and institutions (including religious ones) has made them theologically careless. We should certainly follow them in acknowledging that love for God or faith in him makes demands upon our economic relationships and structures, as upon our social and political ones. But the moment they imply that sin and salvation refer simply to secular relationships we should part company. Of course the gospel bears upon our secular relationships, personal and institutional; p. 302 but in the first place it refers irreducibly to the state of affairs existing between us and God.

III. DECLARING THE GOSPEL IN WORD

So much for what the gospel is about. Now for the question of how to declare it. The initial answer is no less correct for being obvious. We declare the gospel by testifying that God had acted decisively in the life and death of Jesus Christ to remedy our relationship with him; that we believe this to be the case for certain reasons; and that what happened in

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[7] E.g. Dussel, *Ethics & Community*, pp. 19 & 26, where we are told that 'offence of God is *always and antecedently* an act of domination committed against one's brother or sister' (my emphasis); and that 'there is no such thing as a religious sin that is not a political or economic sin….' Accordingly, when Dussel discusses the 'Reign of God' in Christian life (pp. 7–8), the emphasis lies almost entirely on the social dimension or 'being together with others'. It is true that this 'being together' is described as being 'with God', but since no explanation of the significance of this qualification is offered, it is hard to see it as much more than a formality.

Christ bears upon us in certain ways. In other words, our declaration of the gospel will take the primary form of an historical claim, a claim about an event and its significance for us here and now. This is what is usually understood by 'evangelism'.

The Text of Transformed Lives

But evangelism in this sense often faces a major problem that it cannot overcome by itself. And that problem is that there are many people who cannot immediately see why the gospel matters, what difference of importance and for the better it could possibly make to the lives that they lead. Quite apart from the question of the content of the gospel and its truth, there is the question of its meaningfulness. And no amount of persuasive argument about the historical reliability of the New Testament or intelligible explanation of the doctrine of the atonement will suffice to make God's action in Christ interesting to those who are not especially hounded by guilt or weighed down by existential *Angst* and whose lives, busy and rich with more or less decent occupations, seem satisfying enough.

For this reason, at least, declaring the gospel cannot simply take the form of 'evangelism' in the sense just given. It also has to take the form of lives governed and transformed by faith and love for God, lives that display the deep integrity of worshipping and obedient humanity, lives whose lively beauty draws the beholder first to itself and then to its divine cause. Karl Barth makes the point well, albeit in his own terms:

> What is to be expected of [Christians] is that [this Word of God] will give their choosing and willing a specific character so that their lives will become a text accessible not only to their fellow Christians but also to their nonChristian fellows. So long as they do not have the vocabulary, grammar and syntax, the latter may not understand it, but it is legible to them as written p. 303 by a human hand. In the persons of Christians as hearers of God's Word, the Word itself is present to their non-Christian fellows also. In the way that Christians shape their lives as people of the world confronting the same problems as others, their life's task in the midst of others documents the Word, brings it to notice, and draws attention to it. They cannot do more than this and they should not try. it may be that in time they will have to answer questions concerning the reason for the special character of their works, that they will have to comment to others on the text of their lives, that they will have to offer an introduction to the understanding of the text and therefore speak about it. But the first and proper thing that as men of the world they owe other men of the world … can only be the 'behaviour without words' which 1 Peter 3:1 commends….[8]

Sometimes we will be called upon to comment on the text of our lives, to explain how they came to be written and what they signify. But our main task is simply to let our lives be texts which refer to the God who has loved us in Jesus Christ, and which are sufficiently attractive to make their referent interesting.

Now it is certainly true that we may signify God in the text of our individual lives. It is these that the gospel of God's love addresses directly, and these that it would govern and transform. Nevertheless, our individual lives have a social dimension. They are social. From conception on they stand in the context of relationships with others. Who we are, what really makes us tick, is revealed most sharply in the quality of our relationships with other people, in how we treat them and let them treat us. So if God speaks his word through the text of an individual life, he necessarily speaks it also through the social context in which that life is embedded. He speaks it through the set of relationships, immediate and remote, personal and institutional, with which that life is inextricably bound up. He speaks it through the text of individuals-in-society.

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[8] Karl Barth, *The Christian Life: Church Dogmatics, IV/4, Lecture Fragments*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1981, pp. 201–2.

Indeed, it is one of the major themes of the Bible that where God's authority is acknowledged there mere society becomes true community. There the members of a society treat each other justly and generously, living together in that convivial peace which is itself a mark of God's pressence. In the New Testament the role of the Christian community p. 304 *as a witness to God's Word in its own right* features prominently. Let us take, for example, the early chapters of the Book of Acts. In the first verse of chapter 6 we are presented with a social problem—or, to be more precise, with an instance of social injustice within the Christian community: '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'. At the end of chapter 2 we were told that immediately after Pentecost the believers had pooled their capital and were using it to provide for those who had insufficient income (vv 44–45). This is reiterated at the end of chapter 4 (vv 32, 34–35). What the first verse of chapter 6 tells us is that the allocation of resources from the common fund, referred to in the text as 'the daily distribution of food', had become corrupted by ethnic prejudice. Widows who were culturally Greek (the 'Hellenists') were being neglected, presumably because the distribution was in the hands of Aramaic-speakers who were culturally Palestinian ('the Hebrews'). In other words, the unity of the Christian community was being jeopardised by an injustice perpetrated by a partisan abuse of power.

Now, it is possible to interpret the Apostles' response to this problem as implying that the only reason for addressing it was that it threatened to distract them from their real business of proclaiming the resurrection of Jesus from the dead: '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".' Their response could be read as suggesting that social harmony in the Church is important only because it provides an undistracting environment for preaching the word of God. In other words, a peaceful community and the social justice that sustains it is significant only because it enables preaching. Community is simply instrumental to the preaching of the word.

But there are at least two good reasons why this interpretation would be mistaken. The first and major one is that the formation of a community where social justice prevails is presented in the early chapters of Acts as one of the primary manifestations of the power of the Holy Spirit. The creation of a common fund to supply the needs of the poor was, according to chapter 2, one of the very first things that the believers did after Peter's speech on the day of Pentecost (2:42, 44). A couple of chapters later this point is repeated and we are told (4:33–34) that 'much grace was with them all. There were no needy persons among them.' Social justice is an immediate manifestation of the gracious power of the Holy Spirit. It is not, of course, the only manifestation. Two others are mentioned in chapters 3–5: the power to do miraculous works of healing (chapter 3) and the power to preach p. 305 the resurrection of Jesus boldly (chapter 4). But the point is that the formation of just community is not merely a necessary condition for an efficient preaching ministry, but rather a manifestation of the power of the Spirit in its own right.

Further (and this is the second, minor reason) this equality of status between the building of community and the preaching of the word, insofar as both are manifestations of the Spirit's power, is corroborated in the opening verses of chapter 6. For there the word 'distribution' in 'the daily distribution of food' and the word 'ministry' 'in the ministry of the word of God' are both in fact translations of one and the same Greek word: *diakonia* or 'service'. They share the same label. What this means is that the first few verses of Acts 6 treat preaching and the business of maintaining just community as different species of the same thing.

So the early chapters of Acts do not allow us to regard the building of community and of the social justice it required simply as necessary means to the end of effective preaching. They make it quite clear that both are manifestations of the Spirit's power. They also make it clear that both are effective in bringing about repentance and conversion and so in enlarging the Church. At the end of Peter's address in chapter 2 we read (in v 41): 'Those who accepted his message were baptised, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.' But likewise at the end of the passage which follows immediately and is largely devoted to describing the quality of the believers' community, we also read (in v 47): 'And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.' '*Both* preaching *and* community are effective means of saving grace, which, since both are manifestations of the Spirit's power, should not surprise us, for the power of the Spirit is nothing other than the grace of God at work redeeming the world.

The Quality of Communal Life

So far we have argued that we should declare the gospel, not only through verbal statements of what we believe to be true and why, but also through the text of our lives as individual members of the Body of Christ. In the first instance, what this text says will be a matter of how we treat each other: of our ability to behave respectfully, humbly, openly and generously and of our capacity both to grant forgiveness and to receive it. In the first place, the quality of our communal life will consist in the quality of our personal relationships with others. These relationships may be with family members or friends, but they may also be with political opponents, whether on the worship committee or on p. 306 the PC or in Synod. In this respect there is no distinction between the private and the public realms.[9]

Integrity in Power Structures

There is, however, a distinction between the personal and the structural dimensions. So in addition to the question of the quality of our personal relationships in the Christian community, there is also the question of the quality of the public conventions and institutions which order those relationships. There is also the matter of political structures. Every community has political structures. It has sets of conventions which regulate the exercise of power, determining who gets to exercise a certain kind of power under certain conditions. These conventions may be formal and explicit or they may be informal and tacit. More to the point, they may be more or less just. They can give some people or classes of people too much power, and others too little. They can institutionalise the lie that only the skills of a few are important for communal well-being by the custom of refusing others the opportunity to discover and exercise their own. Political structures in the Christian community may or may not be faithful, for example, to Jesus' constant refrain that the power that really counts is the power of the servant (Matt. 20:25–28; Mark 10:42–45; Luke 22:24–27); and they may or may not be true to St Paul's organic vision of the Christian community as one where the obscure (domestic or parochial) service is recognised to be just as vital to the life of the community as the prestigious (synodical or episcopal) one (Rom. 12:4–6a; f1 Cot. 12:4–31). The gospel bears upon us, not only in the ways we treat each other at home or on the public stage, but also in the ways in which we organise our communal life. It bears upon political structures too.

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[9] Although Emil Brunner distinguishes between the private and the public spheres as between the personal and the impersonal, he qualifies the distinction when he aknowledges that there are personal spaces present in all social institutions—'not in the actual activity of the institution itself, but "between the lines"' (*Justice & the Social Order*, Harper, New York & London, 1945, p. 129).

Hitherto I have spoken only of the Christian community, arguing that the quality of its personal relationships and political structures is a necessary and important dimension of witness to the gospel of Christ. This is the primary form of the Church's social responsibility: to demonstrate in the fabric of its own life the power of God's Spirit to restore human beings to the kind of live they were created for—of lives where love for God orders all other loves and makes community possible. p. 307 Through this demonstration the Christian church addresses secular society at once as gospel and judgement. It declares the gospel by displaying proper human life, the kind of social life which we were made to enjoy and for which we all deeply yearn. But by the very same token, it indirectly pronounces judgement, exposing how far sinful society falls short of genuine community by throwing into sharp relief the injustice of its personal dealings and its structures. So simply by being the Church, by reflecting God's Kingdom, by affording glimpses of convivial community under God's authority, the Christian Church fulfils its primary responsibility to secular society.[10] This is the view of the Johannine literature in the New Testament, where the unity of the Church is plainly presented as the main medium of the light of Christ to the world: 'By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another' (John 13:35).[11]

Commitment to a Just Community

Nevertheless, if the Church's responsibility for society begins with the nurturing of its own communal life, it does not end there. It continues in commitment to the cause of just community beyond the circles of confessing Christians. There are (as always) at least three reasons for this. First, if we regard just community as a good at all, then we are bound to care for it wherever we see it, even when it appears beyond the sociological boundaries of the Church. Love for justice is indivisible. Second, to affirm that just community ultimately depends for its fulfilment and its final security upon the right ordering of humankind's relationship with God, is not to deny that just community exists in some form and to some degree outside the Christian Church. There is plenty of empirical evidence, at very least, that non-Christians retain some sense of the justice requisite for a measure of social peace; and that their self-interest can still be sufficiently rational for them to take steps to meet that requirement. Not even Luther and Calvin, with their heightened sense of the depth and extent of sinful corruption, could avoid acknowledging the persistence of an awareness and practice of justice among pagans.[12] The final reason why the Christian Church should be committed to the cause of social justice in society as p. 308 a whole is that the boundaries of the true Church are not crystal clear to us. This side of the *eschaton* we cannot be finally sure who belongs and who does not. So when just community appears among non-Christians we cannot dismiss it summarily as a mirage; for it could be the Holy Spirit's work.

In response to the question, 'how should the Church bear witness to God's saving activity in Christ?' we have argued that it should obviously declare its belief in the Christ-event and give reasons for it; but that it should also show the significance of that event by nurturing just community, primarily among its own ranks, but secondarily in society as a whole. We now move rapidly to a conclusion by pointing out two respects in which the

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[10] This is the kind of line taken by Karl Barth, J. H. Yoder and Stanley Hauerwas.

[11] See my discussion of the Johannine understanding of the relationship between the Christian community and social concern in *Theological Politics*, Latimer Study 29/30, Latimer House, Oxford, 1989, pp. 14–16.

[12] See J. T. McNeill, 'Natural Law in the Teaching of the Reformers', *Journal of Religion*, XXVI, (1946), pp. 168–87.

concept of social justice as we have used it differs from that assumed by many who urge the missionary primacy of social praxis. Here we respond to the last of our three crucial questions.

IV. THE PERSONAL AND RELIGIOUS DIMENSIONS OF SOCIAL JUSTICE

First, as we have conceived it, social justice is not simply a matter of political structures; it is also about personal relationships. We cannot make our *institutions* sufficiently just that *we* can afford not to be. So if we would promote social justice, then we must do it, not only by organisational reform, but also by the moral reformation of the individual-in-community. Therefore, secondly, social justice depends ultimately on spiritual conversion. For ultimately whether we treat each other justly depends upon how we regard ourselves, and how we regard ourselves depends on how we regard God. If we see ourselves as autonomous individuals, finally responsible to no one else, then we will try to play god with each other, abusing and manipulating and judging self-righteously. But if, worshipping God the Creator, we accept ourselves as the creatures we are, limited in power and responsibility and naturally lacking in self-sufficiency; and if, accepting the forgiveness of God in Christ, we recognise each other as equal in sin and in debt to grace, then the mutual respect, forbearance and sympathy that are requisite for just community will be forthcoming. Social justice depends ultimately on the kind of people we are; and ultimately the kind of people we are depends on whether we stand with God or against him.

CONCLUSION

Our conclusion, then, is that evangelism and social praxis are both equally necessary to the mission of the Christian Church. Apart from P. 309 the witness of just community, evangelism will be unable to demonstrate why the gospel matters, why it should interest real human beings who are individuals-in-community. If it would address the world in such a way as to be heard, the Church must show how what it says promotes the human good, a good which is irreducibly (albeit not entirely) social. If the Church proclaims the gospel without simultaneously building just community, then it will speak empty words to ears that are hungry for words of substance.

On the other hand, to engage in social praxis apart from evangelism is to neglect the personal and religious dimensions of just community and to lay its cause wide open to all sorts of utopian illusions and totalitarian self-deceptions. For the promotion of social justice is not simply a matter of enacting new laws and reforming old institutions. At its most substantial it is also a matter of refashioning relationships between persons, together with the tacit codes and conventions and attitudes that govern them. And since our regard for others is decisively shaped by our regard for ourselves, and our self-regard by our regard for God, the cause of social justice itself raises the religious question—and scans the horizon for glad tidings.

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