



Sharing the Good News!

Penn Northeast Conference of the United Church of Christ

PENTECOST JUSTICE II

In my *SGN* article last month, I pointed out that in the first decade or so of the life of the Church (in Jerusalem), it appears to have been commonly understood that those who were wealthier should sell some of their personal assets so as to be able to assist those around them who were impoverished. Within this new *religious* commonwealth, the economic justice rule seems to have been: “**from each according to his ability**” (Acts 11.29), “**to each according to his need**” (Acts 2.45; 4.35).

I concluded that article by asking if this example of extravagant sharing within the Church might also (for Christians, at least) speak to the broader question of whether and how to promote economic justice within our *national* (i.e., civil) commonwealth.

Playing “devil’s advocate” with me, a clergy colleague opined there was no ethical correlation between the Bible’s teaching about charity and government-sponsored economic welfare, inasmuch as the sharing experience of the Jerusalem Church was voluntary, while state-funded welfare programs depend upon a taxation mandate.

Thus, so the argument goes, Christians should not advocate government taking money away from hard-working folk and giving it to others who can’t or won’t work.

Not so fast! Here’s how I see it:

(1) Both Luke’s Gospel and the Book of Acts make clear that extravagant sharing of financial resources to help the poor was a core value of the fledgling group attached to Jesus. And this norm was not negotiable. To be tight with one’s belongings in the face of communal poverty was tantamount to opting out of the early Christian community. Thus peer pressure based on Jesus’ teaching about sharing wealth essentially made *rich* generosity a mandate—as the Ananias and Sapphira incident in Acts 5.1ff indicates.

(2) Jesus’ teaching on economic justice is deeply rooted in the Law and the Prophets of the Old Testament. Here we find that the *political* leaders (kings and princes) were unequivocally condemned when they failed to maintain a

social welfare “net” for all members of Israel’s commonwealth. Even aliens living in the land were afforded the opportunity to receive financial help when their living condition became dire. Thus economic justice within the theocratic political arrangement of Israel was a divine mandate.

(3) There are two reasons why the New Testament has nothing specific to say about the responsibility of Christians working within a civil commonwealth to provide for the financial needs of its citizenry. First, Christians were a despised, distrusted, and sometimes persecuted minority within the totalitarian Roman Empire until long after the New Testament period. They had no voice and no power to influence Roman political policy.

Understandably, they “reinterpreted” the Old Testament’s theocratic mandate for economic justice within the body politic of Israel into a mandate within the religious commonwealth of Christ.

And second, they all believed the “End” was to come within a generation or so. No point wasting a lot of time and effort trying to reform the pagan Roman government if Christ is coming soon to “make all things new!”

But the “End” did not come. Thus the social ethic of the NT Church is in much need of a new “reinterpretation,” inspired by the *Still Speaking God*.

And that is precisely what our Reformed theological forebear, John Calvin, actually began to do! As (E&R) Prof. H. Richard Niebuhr writes, Calvin viewed the state as “God’s minister not only in a negative fashion, as restrainer of evil but positively in the promotion of welfare.”¹ In later generations the Reformed wing of Protestantism inspired Christians to become involved in the democratically organized civil body politic so that they might transform society in light of Christ’s Kingdom values (which included economic welfare).

While Calvin’s view of “church and state” brought these two institutions too close together for those of us who cherish the American principle of the separation of church and state, his understanding that Christians should use their influence to promote economic justice for all people stands as a laudable goal of Christians who can express their political will through the ballot box.

Christians in Roman times had no vote. But we do. And it seems to me that how we vote on matters affecting the financial welfare of our fellow citizens ought to reflect our commitment to the Kingdom values articulated by our Founder and CEO—Jesus the Christ. -Toby Holleman, Associate Conference Minister

TO CONTACT US OR TO REGISTER FOR EVENTS

431 Delaware Avenue	www.pnec.org web page	610-826-3113 phone
Palmerton, PA 18071-1908	Nancy Azar – NancyA@pnec.org	610-826-5464 fax
Fran Potters – Resource@pnec.org	Patty Rehrig – PattyR@pnec.org	Beverly McClure – BeverlyM@pnec.org
Barbara Jennings – BarbaraJ@pnec.org	Alan Miller – AlanM@pnec.org	Toby Holleman – TobyH@pnec.org

¹ *Christ and Culture*, Harper, 1951, p. 217.