

3. A Transformation in the Mode of Christian Service

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The Mission of Remedial Service for the Socially Disadvantaged within our Flawed Social Systems	The Mission of Reeducating the Entire Human Population for Perpetual Participation in Radical Social Transformation
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Applying Moral Absolutes	Living Contextual Thoughtfulness

The typical congregation of Christianity sees its mission in terms of one or more of the images in the left column. Fundamentalist congregations tend to emphasize the first element and the last element. Liberal congregations tend to emphasize the second and third. But all four images describe the action of almost every Christian congregation in the modern era.

Elements from the right column have sometimes appeared in our more liberal congregations, but seldom do we see all four of these elements deeply understood and practiced industriously.

Fully understood, the right hand column presupposes a post-congregational form of Christian communal life. The basic question answered by the right column is not “What should our existing Christian congregations do?” but “How should post-congregational alliances of covenanted circles understand their mission?”

Awakening and Maturing People for Abundantly Living Life on Earth

The mission of preparing people for a “world to come” predominates in most conservative Christian congregations. Such a “Spirit” ministry seldom deals with the true depth dimension of our entire lives. Rather it becomes a limited “service” having to do with consoling people in relation to their dying and their hoped-for immortality. Relative to living life here and now, this ministry tends to support disengagement or to promote engagement of a moralistic quality.

Liberal congregations put more emphasis on abundantly living here and now, but their conception of “abundant” tends to focus on psychological dynamics rather than on the deeper life of the Spirit. For example, Spirit transformation is confused with psychological adjustments. Bodily affections are confused with a Spirit love that includes detachment from self-aggrandizement and compassion for all beings.

The Christian resurgence circles which I envision will combine Spirit depth with practical here-and-now living. A full Christian understanding of “Holy Spirit” has to do with abundantly living here on Earth. Such a Spirit mission is directed toward individual lives but also toward the entire quality of human social and ecological participation. Such Spirit mission is aimed at awakening and maturing not only the members of these Christian circles but entire communities of human beings.

The theological topics indicated in these three paragraphs will be more fully explored in other chapters.

Reeducating the Entire Human Population for Social Transformation

At their loving best, the existing Christian congregations have set up practical services that are clearly needed. In the more disadvantaged sectors of our society, congregations have found ways to provide meals for the hungry, shelter for the homeless, counseling for the disturbed, remedial training for the jobless, legal services for those in trouble, and this list goes on and on. In the wealthier areas of our society, congregations have tended to emphasize a slightly different list of services: preschools for working parents, counseling for dysfunctional families, meeting spaces for 12-step programs, meeting places for lonely singles, and this list goes on and on.

All these services are needed, and Christian compassion is often manifest in doing these things. The general society, especially our money-driven industrial society, will continue to leave many gaps in the services being provided for needy people. For congregations to step in and fill these gaps has been and still is an expression of love. I want to be very clear that I do not feel that expressing love in these ways is in any sense wrong. We can rejoice that some congregations do such work and do it well.

Nevertheless, there are severe limitations to making remedial service the overall perspective on Christian service. These limitations can be revealed by reflecting on the spectacle of a conservative U.S. president like George W. Bush assuming that faith-based initiatives are so good at filling in the gaps of need that he wants to support them in doing more gap filling. Rather than using tax money to resolve some of these gaps in our social systems, he prefers to allocate federal tax dollars to financially strapped religious institutions who are struggling so hard to fill these overwhelming and expanding gaps. Both the politicians and the congregations who are enthusiastic about Bush's efforts are ignoring the wider truth that conservative government and the economic patrons of such government are responsible for creating the gaps that they want these faith-based institutions to fill.

So we might ask, why would an enlightened group of Christians want to play this fill-the-gaps game with a conservative U.S. president? Let us imagine an alternative scenario. Suppose we are a large group of faith-based institutions engaged in drug rehabilitation. Suppose we believe that the enormous amount of money that the government is spending to try to stop drugs from entering the country is a failed effort. Suppose that we feel that a real solution to the drug problem entails spending billions of dollars in drug education and drug rehabilitation programs. With such a context in mind, suppose that we (my imaginary groups) not only refuse to take government money for our drug rehabilitation efforts, but offer to give the federal government all the money that we have raised for drug rehabilitation in exchange for a massive federal program on drug rehabilitation. Suppose we further recommend to the U.S. federal government that the money now being wasted in its futile effort to stop drugs from coming into this country be moved into this massive drug rehabilitation effort. Suppose we even recommend that a big portion of the money now being recommended for a tax break for the wealthy be devoted to this effort. (Perhaps all the wealthy members of our groups send letters to the effect that they are delighted to pay more taxes if these taxes will be spent in this manner.) Finally, we offer to send our trained staff with all their faith-based wisdom and commitment to work in this nation-wide campaign to solve this pressing problem. Such a scenario illustrates the sort of Christian action I am attempting to picture in the right hand column of my chart.

I do not mean to imply that governmental agencies should do everything that needs to be done. But where massive programs are clearly needed and where massive amounts of money are needed to do them, governmental bodies are the appropriate agencies to organize the job. The cynical propaganda that governments always waste money if we give it to them is misleading. These same critics do not criticize the U.S. government for all the money that was wasted in the process of winning World War II or in the process of resisting the spread of

communism. The U.S. Pentagon might even now be accused of wasting at least a third of all the money that flows through that system. Big programs always waste money, but even the waste is worth it if the issue is large enough. Also, we need to assume that in a vital democracy, an irresponsible use of government money can be corrected. The fact that we allow waste to go on and on and on only means that we do not have a vital democracy. It certainly does not mean that government is not the appropriate body to take action on our most pressing, overwhelming, and far-reaching needs.

Of course there are also important roles for nongovernmental organizations. Many things need to be done sooner than consensus can be reached within the larger scope of governmental action. Nongovernmental organizations are the appropriate bodies for doing these vanguard types of work. But once effective solutions and methods are invented, non-governmental organizations can then work toward turning these tasks over to mainstream governmental agencies and related bodies. This frees up the nongovernmental organizations to pioneer in other vanguard arenas. To take the view that nongovernmental agencies should be permanently saddled with filling the same old gaps in a dysfunctional society is simply being codependent with governmental failure.

So let us think through more carefully what modes of services are appropriate for Christian communities to do. If churches (or any other nongovernmental agencies) are going to do preschools, high schools, colleges, drug rehabilitation, housing the homeless, and so on, they need to do those jobs as pioneers showing how such jobs can best be done. All nongovernmental agencies need to renounce being stuck in the enduring role of doing remedial services for the socially disadvantaged when those problems could best be solved by improving governmental functions.

Christian groups, especially, need to withdraw from permanent remedial work and emphasize awakening and education--reeducating the entire human population for perpetual participation in the radical types of social transformation that must continue for decades and decades. Whatever remedial services Christians do can also function as part of this overall educational work. Christian communities do not need to become governments who do everything, nor do they need to become permanent gap-fillers for inadequate governments.

Well-trained resurgent Christians are preeminently qualified to participate in reeducating people for perpetual participation in radical social transformation. This is basically a secular task. It need not be done in an explicitly Christian manner, although it might be done, for example, in a course on Christian ethics. But it can also be done through a secular awakening program, drama, pageant, or whatever. Christians who understand their prophetic heritage are qualified to do this because this is what relevant social education entails: calling into question the reigning illusions of our times and indicating the actual possibilities that yawn before us. Such action is prophetic action. Such action is speaking the good news of the Christian breakthrough in a secular fashion. Prophetic action means calling attention to the fact that we do not have to continue in the existing reign of untruth; we can open ourselves to the future that is actually presenting itself to us. "Repent and believe the good news." Or to put that in secular language: "Surrender your false viewpoints and off-the-mark behaviors and trust in the possibilities of living your actual situation in a creative and effective manner." This is a stern message. It is tough love, but it is "good news" because it liberates the human spirit. Such love is the love Jesus exemplified. Many Christian-identified people have spoken of "following Jesus," but in their actual action they have more often idolized Jesus and then followed his enemies in crucifying contemporary manifestations of the prophetic spirit. Relative to clarifying the next mode of Christian service, nothing is more important than developing effective engagement in prophetic education.

Not only Christian congregations but our entire society is trapped in trying to solve our problems through remedial repairs. When real solutions to our actual problems are spelled out, the cost in systemic social change is so great that most people panic. We say we are willing to avoid the tragedies of global warming, but only if we can drive our big sports-utility vehicles and expand our use of electricity. We do not face the obvious opportunities we have to engage in an all-out campaign to restructure our entire energy system as well as our life styles of energy usage. We say we want to end poverty and ecological devastation, but only if we can continue with the present political and economic systems which allow unrefereed global corporations to rule our economic, political, and cultural lives. We would rather be consoled in our current patterns than be uprooted for a viable future. Such futures might even be fun to envision and build, but we can't stand the insecurity of surrendering our illusions that things are basically all right as they are. And we cannot face the overwhelming demands to think through and build those new forms. These illusions and the cowardice that goes with them are the basic problems of our times. No ministry is more needed from Christians today than this plain witness that remedial repairs will not suffice. Our viable solutions are big, BIG, B I G, systemic changes in the entire fabric of our planet-wide living. "Repent and believe this good news" might be the foundational slogan of the appropriate educational mission.

The above reflections lead to my next topic. These massive programs of social reeducation as well as appropriate pioneering of needed services do not need to be done only through so called "Christian institutions."

Serving Social Needs through appropriate Secular Institutions and Movements

It is not necessary, in most cases, to operate through Christian institutions. Why do we need a Baptist drug rehabilitation and a Methodist drug rehabilitation and a Catholic drug rehabilitation? We just need drug rehabilitation; we don't need a "Christian" name on it or "Christian" credit for it. It might be appropriate in some cases for a Christian group to organize something on its own. But Christians need to become clear that the aim of Christian love is not to show the world how loving Christian institutions can be. Rather, the aim is to get the needs met. In most cases, needs can be met more effectively by secular agencies than by explicitly Christian institutions.

As Christian communal life moves away from denominational congregations and toward "consensus-built alliances of covenanted circles," the need to work through secular agencies becomes even more obvious. Christian resurgence groups can join with Jewish resurgence groups, Muslim resurgence groups, Buddhist resurgence groups and many other people of good will in organizing whatever secular organizations are needed in order to get done what needs to be done.

This secular mode of service not only assembles more energy for the needed tasks, it also frees up those persons within Christian communities who are trained for specific theological, educational, and nurturing ministries to focus their time on these needed tasks rather than on raising money for a preschool, providing a warm building for the homeless, or opening the meeting room for a 12-step program. Administering preschools, providing homes, or leading 12-step work is all wholesome work that some Christians might do. But the communal life of resurgent Christianity does not need to be permanently saddled with running preschools, drug rehabilitation centers, or any other important community services. Christians, like all responsible humans, may be called upon to do such things, but they can do them in secular rather than specifically Christian institutional contexts.

Another problem which is overcome by this shift toward a secular mode of Christian service is the pattern of "rice-Christian" evangelism. This mode of evangelism has been practiced by

Christian bodies for centuries. We offer people something they need (rice) in order to persuade them to listen to our religious message. Then we find, after a time, that we have people in our fellowship who say they accept our “religion” but actually they have come into our fellowship only for the rice.

Rather than manipulating people with rice or any other “affection” into joining our Christian groups, we should discourage people from joining a Christian resurgence circle until they demand it from the depths of their own Spirit need. We can extend to people the full power of the healing message of Christianity without having them join our circles. We can give the spirit gifts we have to give, and let them join or not join whatever religious groups they wish. We need to stop being interested in numbers. We need to stop pretending that the people we seduce into joining our groups will be healed if they stay around long enough.

If we discard the numbers game, then joining a Christian group can mean joining a serious quest toward mature Spirit leadership. It can mean joining a serious mission of thoroughgoing social transformation. Christian groups can also be devoted to preserving and contributing the unique gifts which a renewed Christian heritage has to contribute. Why should anyone join a Christian resurgence circle for any other reason? We want people to join a Christian circle in order to be the body of Christ as their fundamental identity. Therefore, an explicitly Christian group needs to be primarily a Spirit maturation circle designed for people who want to become their full Spirit potentialities. Such a group may also do certain things together for the world around them, and each member of such a group can be supported and encouraged by the group to make all kinds of significant contributions in the wider world. But the main focus of a Christian circle is in being a Christian presence and maturing our capacities to be that presence in the midst of every aspect of our living within the times in which we live.

Living Contextual Thoughtfulness

Finally, I want to say a few words about the shift from applying moral absolutes to doing contextual thinking. Neither the Christian scriptures nor the long history of Christian ethical thought is sufficient to guide our action in these unprecedented times. The moralities found in the Bible represent the efforts of these ancient Spirit people to find guidelines for their own times. We need to understand that our biblical and Christian foreparents were simply doing what contemporary Christians also have to do: think through what is appropriate for the current times. Their examples can inspire us to be as heroic for our times as they were for theirs. But we cannot take the principles they created and simply apply them to our times. We have to face up to the plain truth that there are no moral absolutes. There never have been, and there never will be any absolute principles. “Love your neighbor as yourself” is the closest thing to a universal guideline in the whole of Christian heritage. But even that teaching tells us almost nothing about how to deal with the specific ethical dilemmas of our times. It only tells us that we can use our wisdom about enriching our own lives as a guide for seeing what it means to enrich the lives of others. We contemporary Christians still have to decide all over again for our own times what “enriching” means for ourselves and others.

So it does not make one bit of difference what the Bible says about abortion or homosexuality or human sacrifice or warfare or marriage or washing your hands or any other topic. We have to decide everything all over again. This is so obvious. Why do we resist this? Because we are selfish, security-hungry people who want to know for sure that we are doing the right thing. We need to remember that the name of that tree from which Adam and Eve were forbidden to eat was called “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.” This is the abiding truth of that primordial story: an absolute knowledge of good and evil is forbidden to the human species. We are assigned to a life of moral uncertainty. Only “God” is certain. We don’t get to be wise “like God.” And when we think we are infinitely wise, we have fallen out of the

garden in which “God” walks and talks with us on a daily basis. Our authenticity resides in knowing that we don’t have certainty and never will have it. Furthermore, we do not need to have it. We are indeed commanded by our “Creator” to get out there and make uncertain decisions to the best of our ability. As the apostle Paul put it, “For freedom, Christ has set us free.”

This abiding context lies behind the permission we have from our own Christian heritage to reformulate that very heritage for our own times.