SOCIAL ETHICS: DISCERNING THE CHURCH'S BIBLICAL OBLIGATION

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Introduction

A survey of recent literature indicates need for a unified Christian approach to social issues and especially need for a biblical foundation and guidelines regarding social ethics. Literature abounds on this subject, but little is worked out from a Christian and biblical basis. The best systematic attempts are by Jacques Ellul, *The Ethics of Freedom* (1976), Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character* (1981), and Oliver O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order* (1986). Some of the best monograph works by individual Christian authors are included on the bibliography.

More important for us as Christians is the growing presence around our communities of the poor and the hungry, of those who have no hope for the future and so resort to drugs and alcohol, of those who believe there are no absolutes and no God and so engage in sex without commitment and thus incur the wrath of God as well as the consequences of babies who are unwanted and of abortions. From the corruption of our leaders in politics and business to the degradation of America's slums, we reveal the failure of godly character and the failure of the church to be what God intended as light and salt. At the center of this crisis is the failure to produce godly leaders and the crisis of the family.

Of course we thank God that this is not the whole picture, and that there is tremendous evidence of the impact of the living church of Jesus Christ on our society. But the realities above give us pause in thinking that we "have it all together."

Thus, on both philosophical and practical grounds we need to explore the issues of the individual Christian's and the corporate church's social obligation. This paper will focus on the institutional church's response to the needs of society.

What can the church do to address these concerns? What, before God, should the church do? What are its social goals? How can it develop in social areas with integrity to the gospel? How does God address the church in local situations?

These issues will include ethical, theological and philosophical content and will draw on politics, morals, church polity, liberation theology, learning theory, and character development. This does not so much indicate intellectual imprecision as a focused effort on the border of these academic disciplines.
From the perspective of the Christian who lives in the church and the world the issue is much more sharply focused: we need to express our freedom to live and our commitment to God in integrity through our community. Such a combination of Christian freedom and Christian commitment is the best means of evangelism and the best means of social involvement. What then is the nature of our obligation and how may this obligation be lived with integrity in our community? What is the church's responsibility for its own corporate action and what is the church to do to train and equip the individual?

To begin to address these issues from the perspective of the local church I will start by examining the nature of moral "oughts," go on to look at biblical obligations and social ethics, see what we can learn of the church's obligation by examining the role of social service, social action and liberation theology and finally try to derive some obligations for the church.

I. The Nature of Moral "Oughts"

There is an ongoing debate among theologians and philosophers concerning the nature of moral "oughts." The decisions made here have implications for all other metaphysical issues, so this will serve as an introduction to a number of moral and metaphysical problems.

Some philosophers are simply skeptics who will not change. These need not concern us as theologians. There are, similarly, Christians who assert that we need not understand why one ought to do something, we need simply to obey. These authoritarians who denigrate the love of God with the mind and the lordship of Christ over each believer need not concern us either (O'Donovan, 172). There are many individuals who are honestly seeking to make rational sense of the competing moral and religious claims we make in normal discourse. These persons have much to offer.

To give too short a summary, traditionally there have been four philosophical alternatives in categorizing moral discourse.

The first alternative is to see moral statements as assertions which describe real ethical obligations upon us and which thus function as prescriptions for moral conduct. The main problems with this position are (1) to describe the nature of moral obligation in general, (2) the justification for this statement of moral obligation, (3) to show the means of moral knowledge and character development, and (4) the justification for specific obligations in particular. Some people derive their ethical absolutes from the nature of the universe or human nature; others derive absolutes from God by way of natural law or divine command theories. Writers include John Searle and John Rawls as well as all Christian writers.

The second alternative views all moral obligation claims as assertions of how we individually want the world to work morally. In this view, statement of moral obligations are emotive, not ontological. The problem here is that most people mean more than, "I wish you would not do that," when confronted by a potentially devastating situation (such as murdering millions of people). We normally believe that people should be held morally responsible for their actions, instead of simply saying, "I will not like you
The third alternative is to see all moral statements as not meaningful at all, literally non-sense. Most people who hold a position like this are materialists and also reject God and any sense of moral absolutes. These people are often caught in a dilemma such as columnist Carl Rowan, who writes about gun control and wishes to outlaw private ownership of guns, but was guilty of shooting a teenage trespasser with an unregistered gun. These people know that we make moral assertions and valuations, they simply believe we are mistaken to do so. People who fit this category include Elizabeth Anscombe and Anthony Flew.

The fourth alternative is to see moral statements in light of the larger system called utilitarianism. In this case moral assertions are useful to the extent they help us, and others who subscribe to these rules, to achieve our goals. This is unrelated to any sense of moral absolutes. Writers include J.S. Mill, John Dewey and a host of American philosophers.

The best approach to providing a philosophical base for moral discourse is to look at the actual uses of moral discourse and see how we do in fact use moral statements. We use moral statements in two ways. First, we often use moral statements to place moral judgments on described states of affairs. For example, when we say, "It is wrong to permit abortions." This use tells us nothing about how we get moral absolutes, how to apply general principles to specific situations, or how to justify a moral stance in general.

The second use creates or justifies moral discourse in general. For example, Searle (1964) offers the linguistic action of making promises. When we make a promise to someone, we create a moral obligation to fulfill our word to that person. We had no moral obligation. We now have one. This shows that we can move from a state of affairs, in this case a linguistic assertion within a relationship, to a situation of moral obligation. This approach has been debated by Hare and others but I think Searle's case stands.

Barth and Thielicke introduced, and Michael Polanyi and Stanley Hauerwas have greatly deepened, our understanding that moral obligation always occurs within personal relationships. Christian thinkers as diverse as Walter Kaiser, Charles Curran, Oliver O'Donovan, and Helmut Thielicke have made the point that God is a person with whom we also have a relationship. As the creator and redeemer He is the ultimate one with whom we interact and thus this relationship is foundational for all other relationships. That this creator and redeemer has also given us commands places us under a further obligation.

God, as Trinity, has personal relations within the Godhead. This means that the character of God is determinative for all created reality and is already demonstrated in the relations of the members of the Trinity. "God is good" is a necessary character trait (not a separate "Platonic" ideal form) since no member of the Godhead can, by the nature of the case (given equal omniscience) lie to another member or otherwise be deceptive.
God, as the creator, has built the world to function within specific guidelines, physically, morally and spiritually. Thus, some form of natural law exists and places moral and spiritual obligations upon us. Man, as a being created by a good God and pronounced "Good" should develop a good character and should act good also.

God has revealed Himself to us and has given us commands about how we are to act toward Him, ourselves, other people and the world. These commands tell us what is already the case by nature and what God wants us to do within our human and divine relationships.

Thus, for the Christian, moral ethics based on natural law and the Bible are prescriptive, as well as whatever come to us through natural social interaction.

There are, of course, the deeper problems of justifying our claims to revelation and natural law, demonstrating the failure of other claimants to moral authority and showing the derivation of our claims from the way we exist in the world, but we cannot pursue these here.

II. Biblical Obligations and Social Ethics

As Christians-in-the-world we have both biblical and social obligations. The biblical obligations include the whole of God's revelation to us. This already raises the issue of how to interpret the meaning of Old Testament moral codes for Christians today. The best work has been done by Kaiser (1983). He defends the common distinction between civil, ceremonial and moral laws in the Old Testament. We must also raise the issue of whether the church as a corporate entity has social obligations.

The particular hermeneutical stance taken will influence one's position, but in general Christians are united on taking the Old Testament commands, specific enactments of general principles, as examples. By studying the Old Testament we hope to discern the general moral and civil principles which support the specific Old Testament codes. In some cases the laws are sufficiently broad to apply directly to all cultures of all times; for example, do not murder. Other laws are stated within the cultural and historical milieu of Israel, and it is a bigger problem to restate these laws so that they can be more readily applicable to us. This will have implications for us as individuals concerning which issues the Lord would have us work on but it does not necessarily carry over to the local church as an institution.

Kaiser spends 60 pages showing how laws from the Pentateuch can be expanded to the level of general moral codes for both individuals and nations. Thielicke's second and third volumes are biblical developments of this procedure. This work is fairly straightforward, both in theologies and in commentaries.

What is not so simple is the formation of a central theme, and development of a case, or set, of guidelines which could be applied by a church. Kaiser sees personal and social holiness, purity, as the goal of the laws (1983, pp. 139-256). Thielicke builds a complex case for faith and love, manifested in all relationships, as the key ingredient, with freedom as the dynamic balance under the Holy Spirit.
Hauerwas believes that the historical traditions of the Christian community, as a whole, should inform the decisions of the church as well as of individual Christians (1981, pp. 89-154). Curran, from a Roman Catholic perspective, is balanced more toward Kaiser's or Thielicke's position (1985, pp. 29-62). But Curran also must deal with the specific case laws (casuistry) which the Roman church has built up over the centuries.

Thus the church as the community of believers is concerned to form and train the lives of the individuals who make up each local expression. But does the church have obligations beyond those of the individual members?

O'Donovan, more than even Kaiser and Gustafson, suggests that the Christian must build personal character so that one's actions in specific situations arise from the heart in the power of the Spirit. Character is developed by spending time in the Bible and wrestling in the realities of life with the issues of freedom, authority, love and the fact of our unity in Christ (1986, pp. 76-203). For O'Donovan (p. 246), as for the present author, the Great Commandment (Mark 12:29-31), to love God and neighbor, is the central ethical principle.

At this point I must summarize thousands of pages of exegetical and historical investigation and present a few succinct social principles derived from the Bible. By the nature of the case, all of these principles are capable of being put into practice by all people, and are obligations for Christians. But there is no evidence thus far that the institutional church has these obligations for corporate social service.

1. Love must characterize the nature of all that we do in practice. Therefore, we respect and honor all people. All good habits of character are to be developed.

2. Holiness is the goal of all behavior. Therefore, values are significant to all actions. This will include values of morality and of logic (i.e., truthfulness, etc.).

3. Obedience to the Lord, within a love relationship, is the motivational cause of all actions.

4. God's grace, which comes to us through the power of the Holy Spirit, is the only sufficient source for fulfillment of our obligations; therefore we need to be properly related to God.

5. The conscience, bounded by the Word of God and the Spirit of God, is sufficient for negative direction, i.e., how to know when not to do something.

6. The community, in the persons of its leaders, is responsible for passing on and enforcing social standards in keeping with holiness. There must be the concern of solidarity of peoples and dialogue regarding application of the general tenets of revelation. This concern and dialogue, translated into praxis, introduces the concept of corporate
social obligation for the church.

III. Social Service, Social Action, and Liberation Theology

Christian praxis, the application of the teachings of God to life in our world, as a social movement has taken three forms.

First is social service. Wunder (1986) defines social service as, "deeds done for people to relieve or alleviate suffering by direct treatment. This is people oriented" (p. 6). Second, by contrast, he defines social action as an attempt to "extricate an institution (all structures, whether unified or diverse, that have a social, political or educational purpose within a given culture) from those who dwell in darkness and bring it under the lordship of Christ by restructuring it to act in accordance with the propositions of the scripture" (p. 6).

Wunder concludes that the reformation of structures is not a mandate for the Church [individuals or corporate body] and thus is not on the same par as the clear mandate for fulfilling the Great Commission" (p. 67). He also concluded that social service was an important obligation for individuals, and a possibility for institutional involvement but not a mandate. This contrast between social service (personal or corporate response to social hurts) and social action (personal or corporate response to the structures which caused the hurt) is not new.

Earlier, William Temple took a similar position: "The Church is both entitled and obliged to condemn the society characterized by these evils: but it is not entitled in its corporate capacity to advocate specific remedies" (p. 82). "The Church is committed to the everlasting Gospel...; it must never commit itself to an ephemeral program of detailed action" (p. 29).

However, not all theologians agreed with Temple and Wunder's conclusions. In the last century Finney put it bluntly:

Now the great business of the church is to reform the world--to put away every kind of sin. The church of Christ was originally organized to be a body of reformers. The very profession of Christianity implies the profession and virtually an oath to do all that can be done for the universal reformation of the world. The Christian church was designed to make aggressive movement in every direction ... to reform individuals, communities, and governments, and never rest ... until every form of iniquity shall be driven from the earth. (Revival Lectures. p. 21)

There are successors to Finney today, the most radical of whom have formed a third option: the movement called liberation theology. Gustavo Gutierrez has described liberation theology as mankind seeing "the process of transformation as a quest to satisfy the most fundamental human aspirations - liberty, dignity, the possibility of personal fulfillment for all" (p. 21). This broad understanding of the quest of liberation theology is put in the context of arising from and serving the poor. Thus, adequate theology is done by the poor and for the poor. Those who have not lived with the poor and entered into
their struggles cannot do proper liberation theology.

The liberation theology movement has been summarized by H. Wayne House. "Proclaiming salvation as having an earthly nature and seeking equality and justice for all in this life are the essence of liberation theology. That is the meaning of Christianity and the mission of the Church" (p. 161). Wayne Johnson defines the movement as the "attempt to rethink theology from the standpoint of the poor and oppressed and to make the Bible relevant to that context" (p.8). Johnson writes, "The commitment to praxis stems from Marx's mandate to change the world rather than interpret it. Thus, changing the world has come to be designated praxis" (p. 63). The problem is that, in the process of redefining the nature of theology and of the work of the Church in the world, the gospel is transformed from a message from God about entering into a relationship with Him which will have consequences both here in this life and in the life to come, into a message about freeing all people from social and material bondage. The gospel becomes indistinguishable from Marxism.

For our purposes, the main question may be refined as whether the church as an institution has a responsibility to perform either social service or social action or both. I shall assume that the individual Christian has the duty to perform social service and the possibility of performing social action within the New Testament mandate for believers.

In the gospels most scriptures address individual believers and there are few passages where the church, as distinct from Israel, is addressed as an institution. One of the corporate passages is Matthew 16:15-19 where Peter declares that Jesus is the Christ. In the following comments Jesus describes the spiritual warfare of the church against the powers of hell and confers the power of binding and loosing (v. 19). This is given to the whole church, as is seen in the parallel passages in Matthew 18:18 and John 20:23.

Without getting into the definition of spiritual warfare or binding and loosing, it is clear that the whole earth is the focus, not just the affairs of the church as an institution apart from the world. But beyond the proclamation of binding and loosing there is no mention that any action is called for in the warfare.

In John 14-17 Jesus addresses the disciples and points them to the future. In the discussion it becomes evident that the later followers of the original twelve disciples are involved in the teaching (John 17:20-21). However, beyond praying for the unity of the future disciples Jesus does not give any command or call for action.

The only other passage in the gospels which discusses or describes the church beyond the original disciples is the Great Commission in Matthew 28:18-20. Here Jesus calls on the disciples to lead others into discipleship and to pass on to them the commands they have received from Jesus. This will effect future disciples but does not discuss the church as a corporate entity.

If the Old Testament cannot be used directly to find social injunctions for the church, and I do not believe it can be so used, and if the gospels do not contain injunctions of a corporate nature then we must turn to the epistles. In examining Acts and the epistles I found 47 passages which related to the
duties of the corporate church. These may be divided into six categories:

1. Unity and Discipline

2. Forms and Style of Worship

3. Practice of Spiritual Gifts and other issues of personal interaction

4. Prayer

5. Financial Support

6. The Poor and Widows

While all of these are interesting and may have broadly stated implications for the church, only the last two areas concern issues which relate to social obligations of the church (I will not include the interesting verse in Galatians 6:10 where Paul says, "Do good to all men," since this is not directed to the church but to individual Christians; however, the similar passage in Titus 3:14 does seem directed to the church as a whole).

Financial support is specifically to be given by church members to help the church function in three areas. First, the church is to meet general needs of its own operation and members (I Corinthians 16:2). Second, the church is to support full-time workers as need exists (III John 8). Third, the church is to raise money for special needs, as they exist (Acts 2:44-45; Galatians 2:10). The last set of verses deal with meeting financial needs of the needy within the congregation and at large.

In the area of the poor and widows there are five passages. The first two deal with widows. Acts 6:1-6 led to the establishment of deacons to deal fairly with the widows in providing food.

I Timothy 5:3, 17 mentions having a list of widows, but does not say what services are provided. The text specifies that if a widow is under 60 she or her family are to meet the needs and in any case if the family is able to do so then they have the second level of obligation, not the church.

Only two verses relate directly to the poor. Galatians 2:10 says to remember the poor. Paul's context is the commissioning of Barnabas and himself to be missionaries to the Gentiles. The only seeming injunction given to them by the leaders of the Jerusalem church was to remember the poor, which, Paul adds, he was eager to do.

The other verse is in the form of a negative command. In 2 Thessalonians 3:10 Paul writes that if any man will not work, he is not to be allowed to eat. We guess that the church had some form of providing meals for those who could not earn a living. If someone was able to work but did not choose to do so, that person was not allowed to partake of the church's substance. This is the only command I found
which would speak to the manner of providing support for the poor, namely, if they can provide for themselves they must do so; the church's provision is for those who cannot provide for themselves.

The final verse in this area is Titus 3:14. Titus is to help the people "learn to do good deeds to meet pressing needs." This does not necessarily apply to the poor only or to the needs of widows, but it would apply in these two cases and in other similar ones.

The two verses on meeting the financial needs of the poor and the five verses on meeting other needs of the poor and widows are the only verses I can find in Acts and the epistles regarding social obligations. A mandate for the church's social obligations may include the following principles:

1. Be aware of the needs of the poor and widows within the congregation and develop programs to meet their needs.

2. Be aware of the needs of the poor at large and do what you can to help meet their basic needs for food and survival.

3. If anyone is able to meet his or her own needs, or if their family is able to do so, then the church has no obligations.

4. In general, do good deeds whenever you can to meet the needs of people.

These four principles constitute the New Testament mandate of the church's social obligations.

IV. Obligations for the Church

The church, for our present social service application, is the collection of saints living in any given community. This will usually be an area in which other social service groups function from one local service office, such as welfare, social security, Red Cross, etc.

Local evangelical churches, either individually or by banding together for some actions, can use secular or government services when appropriate or create meaningful alternatives when needed (eg. World Impact, Salvation Army, etc.) to meet the needs of the poor and widows as outlined in the mandate above.

There does not seem to be any texts which support the idea of social action or economic or political liberation. While this does set what may seem to be rather severe limits, please remember that we are describing the minimum which a church must do to be faithful to the New Testament. This level of commitment to the poor and widows, in a society where the gap between the rich and the poor is growing and where the older generation is growing out of proportion to the total population, will have implications which should convict us and probably will scare us. I know my church does not measure up
to the minimum. I wonder what God's judgment will be if we do not take His word seriously.

Of course, a church may elect to do far more than this by way of social service and would still be faithfully following the New Testament, assuming other areas were kept in balance.

This conclusion does not speak at all to the calling of the individual Christian who lives and works in the world and sees the needs first hand. Such believers need to come to terms with the injunctions to be salt and light and how to translate this into service. We, the theological and biblical leaders of the church, in addition to seeking to meet the church's obligation and our own personal social and spiritual obligations, need to be concerned that the individuals meet their calling and teach, motivate and train them to do so.

Bibliography


