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The New Testament Approach to Social Responsibility

Donald Guthrie

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There has been a variety of different ideas on the subject of Christian approach to the social order. These range from the extreme of maintaining complete non-involvement to the extreme of wholehearted committal. The former is based on the contention that Christianity is spiritual and not social, because the gospel deals essentially with man's spiritual problems. The latter extreme maintains a fully-fledged social gospel and sees no relevance in the spiritual issues. Our present purpose is not to discuss either of these extremes, but rather to examine the New Testament evidence which provides guiding principles on the subject of social responsibility. There is certainly no blue print which sets out the Christian approach in detail, for the New Testament does not purport to present a manifesto of this nature. Although certain specific aspects will be considered these will serve mainly as a framework for the enunciation of general methods.

Our first consideration will be the theological basis of the New Testament approach. Some justification must be offered for basing comments on social involvement on theology, but the reason for this procedure is that theology concerns the whole man, including his environment. In this respect the New Testament approach is patently different from those theories which concentrate on the environment, believing that an improved environment will produce an improved man. The New Testament begins with the person and then proceeds outwards to the society of which he is a part.

THE THEOLOGICAL BASIS

The two main foci in our discussion of the theological basis will be the doctrine of man and the doctrine of God. Either could provide the starting point. The main problem is to prevent the discussion from becoming too anthropological or too theological. A true perspective will be obtained only when both aspects are taken fully into account. The doctrine of man will be first considered because it brings into sharp focus the major problems confronting all approaches to social responsibility.

1. *The nature of man*

The New Testament assumes the validity of the Old Testament view that man was made in the image of God.¹ The whole conception of sin requires that there must have been a state from which man has deviated. Paul's letter to the Romans is the classic example of such an assumption. The quest for righteousness involves a recognition of its absence and the desirability of its presence. Paul's whole argument would make no sense if 'righteousness' were not a generally sought after quality, which was nevertheless difficult if not impossible to attain.

The real problem of man's attitude towards his social environment is coloured by the fact that man has fallen from a state of innocence. The doctrine of original sin can only be understood

¹ Cf. J N. D. Anderson, *Into the World* (1968), 15ff., for comments on the 'image' and its social implications.

against the background of original righteousness which is the main ingredient in the 'image' which man had. A true understanding

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of the nature of man involves the recognition of three stages: man in his original state of creation, man in his fallen state and man in his redeemed state. The first of these no longer applies to any person except to the perfect humanity of Jesus. He knew no sin (2 Cor. 5:21). His perfection shows without question the potential of the creature. A perfect social order could clearly exist if all men possessed this kind of perfection. Nevertheless the New Testament everywhere makes clear that no such perfection exists. 'All have sinned and come short of God's glory' is not only an Old Testament statement, but is taken over as a basic assumption in Paul's epistle to the Romans (Rom. 3:10ff.).²

This second stage in man's development introduces an environmental tension when compared with the first. This is brought out strongly in the New Testament by antitheses. The world is in darkness (John 1:5; cf. 1 John 1:5ff.). It is ignorant of God in the sense of real understanding (John 17:25). Human minds have been blinded by the god of this world (2 Cor. 4:4). Hence a totally alien element has been introduced into the environment in which man is placed. The created order itself has been disturbed (Romans 8:22).³ Man's relationship to his environment cannot proceed as it existed in the original creation. The whole of life, both individually and collectively has been affected. Even in that closest knit of social groups, the family, parents are described by Jesus as 'evil' (Matt. 7:11).⁴ With the best intentions, lavishing gifts on their offspring, they nevertheless cannot avoid being biased in a sinful direction. If this is true of family relationships, it is much more apparent in wider society. Indeed, Jesus described His own environment as a 'faithless and perverse generation' (Matt. 17:17).⁵ The consequence of this must be a warping of social responsibility. No longer does man use natural resources for the good of all, but for selfish ends. If the environment is polluted it is no more than a consequence of this general condition of perversity. In other words the problem lies deep within the fallen nature of man.⁶ In view of this, no social programme which does not take account of man's basically sinful nature is likely to succeed. It would, for instance, be useless to devise a scheme for industry which would depend on

² J. Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (1967), 103, calls the statement in Rom. 3:10 'the precipitate of the Biblical teaching'.

³ C. H. Dodd, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans* (1932), 134, regards Paul's statement in Rom. 8:22 as a truly poetical conception. F. J. Leenhardt, *The Epistle to the Romans* (1961), 222ff., emphasises the essential connection in Paul's view between the creature and the creation, while admitting that the mode of expression was determined by Paul's contemporary view of his environment.

⁴ Many commentators regard the *πονηροὶ* here as relative, i.e. as compared with God (cf. A. H. M'Neile, *The Gospel according to St. Matthew* (1949), on Matt. 7:11). F. V. Filson, *A Commentary on the Gospel according to St. Matthew* (1960), 194, rightly acknowledges that Jesus clearly indicates the sinfulness of all men.

⁵ P. Bonnard, *L'Évangile selon Saint Matthieu* (1963), 260, regards the perversity as consisting in the faithlessness. Cf. also D. Hill, *The Gospel of Matthew* (1972), 270. Filson, *op. cit.*, 194, thinks the faithlessness to be a failure to see God's power at work in Jesus.

⁶ D. O. Moberg, *Inasmuch* (1965), 66, points out that although from a theological point of view sin is the source of all social evils, it is not always the sin of the victims which brings about their plight. This factor complicates the problem of social responsibility in contemporary society. Cf. T. C. Hammond, *Christian Freedom*, 178ff., on the effects of the doctrine of the Fall on ethical theory. A. V. Murray, *The State and the Church in a Free Society* (1958), 3, remarks, 'All utopias have come to grief on the rock of original sin, and our generation, while it is willing and even eager to admit the failure, is strenuously unwilling to admit the cause of it.' He goes on therefore to explore ways of ordering a society of sinful men.

everyone being as concerned about the interests of others as about their own, since it is patently obvious that the assumption would be unrealistic. There would not be the need for constant warnings in the New Testament about social evils (e.g. Rom. 1:24f., Col 3:5ff., 1 Pet. 4:3ff.) if these were not a continuous problem in the contemporary world. The New Testament does not produce a social programme for the eradication of these evils, because it recognises that the root causes are not social but spiritual.

This leads to the third stage—man in his redeemed state. The New Testament doctrines of redemption and reconciliation are central to the whole Christian message and involve a disarming of man's natural enmity against God and of his self-centredness.⁷ The Christian now lives on a new plane (Col. 3:1). He recognises that he has passed from the sphere of darkness to light (2 Cor. 4:6, Col. 1:13).⁸ He is a new creation, old things have passed away (2 Cor. 5:17). The consequence of this is that redeemed man finds himself with an entirely new set of values and yet remaining in his former alien environment. A tension must at once develop between his former way of looking at social responsibility and his new principles in Christ. The New Testament concentrates on the privileges and responsibilities of the Christian life, because this was the aspect which was new. The Christian faith demands new attitudes and actions which are of prior

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importance for those who have just turned away from a pagan background. This will explain the relative paucity of specific exhortations towards social responsibility. Yet it would be wrong to suppose that interest in one's environment can be dispensed with by Christians. Those who take the view that Christians should not concern themselves actively with social issues because the New Testament does not teach it may be overlooking the implicit understanding of the Christian view of redeemed man in his environment.⁹

The tension which develops between spiritual and social concerns has often led to contrary interpretations of New Testament teaching. When it is borne in mind that the burden of the New Testament message is God's method of dealing with man's basic need, it will be seen that the approach to social responsibility could not be other than by means of spiritual salvation. In other words no plan of social reform on specifically Christian principles is possible that does not take into account that society is not redeemed. The approach in the New Testament to society tends to be individual, on the principle that redeemed men will have a salutary effect on the environment in which they are placed. Nevertheless the basic spiritual concern in the New Testament is not without considerable value to the social reformer, for the Christian view of man will never lead to an over-optimistic view of the potential of any specific programme. Those in the New Testament age were too realistic, for instance, to inaugurate a crusade for the abolition of slavery, but if all society had been redeemed the conditions which made slavery acceptable would have disintegrated and the case for slavery would have collapsed. The New Testament concentrated on the spiritual implications. It may be claimed that the New Testament view of man gives the Christian social reformer a better

⁷ On redemption and reconciliation, cf. J. Denney, *The Christian Doctrine of Reconciliation* (1917), V. Taylor, *The Atonement in New Testament Teaching*³ (1958), L. Morris, *The Cross in the New Testament*.

⁸ C. F. D. Moule, *The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Colossians and Philemon* (1957), 57, points out that the distinctive Christian feature about the darkness-light imagery is that the Christians enjoy the transformation in the present.

⁹ Cf. Moberg, *op. cit.*, chapter 2, against this. On p. 97 he comments on otherworldliness.

understanding of man than the non-Christian reformer who begins from the basically opposite point of view, i.e. that man is capable of saving himself. The failure to find a satisfactory answer to many social problems is due to an unrealistic view of man's acceptance of social responsibility. In a world which is essentially self-centred, the concerns of others cannot be expected to be given prior importance. This is not, of course, to affirm that altruism cannot exist in the non-Christian world, but it is certainly rare in a highly industrialised society.

Another aspect of human nature which is important in the sphere of society is the sanctity of personality. Where people are treated as less than persons, the New Testament must issue a challenge, for it is a necessary concomitant of personal salvation that no distinctions may be made between the rights of different classes of people. The New Testament doctrine of the weak and the strong (Rom. 14) does not suggest a doctrine of the survival of the fittest.¹⁰ There is no support for the view that one's own interests take precedence. Paul's exhortation, 'Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ' (Gal. 6:2), is based on the assumption that his readers had strong social responsibilities to see that other people's needs were merged with their own.¹¹ The supreme example of one who bore other's burdens is Christ, who on all occasions treated other people as persons and was ready to shoulder their responsibilities.

2. The Nature of God

From the fore-going considerations it is evident that the New Testament view of the world is certainly not anthropocentric as most non-religious approaches tend

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to be. The nature of redeemed man involves a redeeming God and for this reason attention must now be given to the implications for human society of the nature of God. One of the most characteristic features of God portrayed in the New Testament is His love (1 John 4:8), which is an essentially out-going attribute.¹² The object of love is all-embracing, i.e. the world (John 3:16). This testifies to the strong sense of involvement which God has with His creatures. This love, moreover, exists even when the response is sheer hostility (Rom. 5:8). It must be regarded as a pattern for the creature if it is an attribute of the Creator (1 John 4:7). Moreover, the relationship between God the Father and God the Son is exemplary of the relation between Christ and the believer (John 15:9). Love is a powerful means of showing concern. Man's social responsibility is part of the 'image' impressed upon him by the Creator.

The greatest expression of God's love is seen in His work of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:19). Man could never have escaped from the net of his sinful nature if God had not taken the initiative. The reconciling work of God in Christ is fundamental to a true approach to social responsibility. As man becomes a new creation, this means a new approach not only to himself, but to others (2 Cor. 5: 17). A man in society who has been reconciled to God will not conscientiously be able to countenance any method of social reform which would cause alienation between people. Methods of violence would seem to be ruled out on this score

¹⁰ Cf. P. S. Minear's discussion of the implications of Rom. 14, in *The Obedience of Faith* (1971), 8ff.

¹¹ Cf. my comments on Gal. 6:2 in *Galatians* (1969), 152.

¹² For a study of the Christian idea of love, cf. A. Nygren, *Agape and Eros* (1953), J. Moffatt, *Love in the New Testament* (1929).

alone, as would methods which favour one group at the expense of another.¹³ The gospel is an agency of reconciliation and any social reform which Christians show must be in line with and indeed prompted by that aim.

Another factor arising from the nature of God is that His reconciling purpose extends beyond persons to the material creation. Paul's view of cosmic groaning for freedom from present bondage (Rom. 8:20ff.) shows a profound approach to the environment from a Christian standpoint.¹⁴ If the material creation is in any sense implicated in God's reconciling work (if this is Paul's meaning) this provides some basis for a Christian approach to ecology.¹⁵ The divine pattern pre-supposes that man must be held responsible for polluting the environment. To disturb the balance of nature for purely selfish ends is fundamentally opposed to the Creator's approach to His creation. The cosmic plan is even more fully set out by Paul in Eph. 1:10 where the idea that all things will be united in Christ affixes a dignity to the creation itself. There can be no doubt that the New Testament conception of God as Creator (in line with the Old Testament teaching) has a powerful and direct implication for man in deciding his social responsibilities.

3. The Theological Limitations to Social Involvement

If, as indicated above, the New Testament implies that man by nature should exercise social responsibility, it is important to consider the limits within which this responsibility operates. Since society is not run on theocratic lines, there are inevitably times when the social expectations of the natural man clash with the standards set by God. When such tensions arise some guide-lines are needed. These are provided by the New Testament.¹⁶ The teaching of Jesus makes clear that obedience to God takes precedence over obedience to the State, although ideally they should coincide. In rendering to Caesar what belongs to him and to God what He demands implies the necessity for putting God first. A man must follow the dictates of his own conscience,¹⁷ in which case there will be times when

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he must enter into moral judgment of the social environment in which he lives. Indeed he sees this as part of his social responsibility.¹⁸ If public morals deteriorate, those who set higher store on public decency would be failing in their duty if no protest were made. The modern focus on pornography is a case in point. The New Testament contains sufficient

¹³ For studies on the Christian approach to violence, cf. B. Griffiths (editor), 'Is Revolution change?' (1972), J. Ellul, *Violence* (1970). Ellul argues that violence is a necessity for the continuation of every state and then proceeds to point out a Christian view of its weaknesses (81ff.). He maintains that violence can only beget violence.

¹⁴ Whatever the interpretation of Rom. 8:20ff., it is clear that Paul was convinced that the material creation could not be divorced from the needs and aspirations of man. R. Haldane, *Exposition of the Epistle to the Romans* (r.p. 1958), 372, maintains that the creation is not what it was before man's sin and therefore shares man's bondage. W. Sanday and A. C. Headlam, *The Epistle to the Romans*⁵ (1902), 210ff., bring out the distinctive Christian ideas as compared with Jewish over the renovation of nature.

¹⁵ Cf. S. E. Wirt, *The Social Conscience of the Evangelical* (1968), 102ff., for a brief statement of a Christian approach to the problem of pollution.

¹⁶ For studies on the Christian approach to the State, cf. O. Cullmann, *The State in the New Testament* (1955), A. V. Murray, *op. cit.*, Cf. also W. Lillie, *Studies in New Testament Ethics* (1961), 82ff.

¹⁷ Cf. Lillie, *op. cit.*, 451f., U. Hallesby, *Conscience* (1939).

¹⁸ For a discussion of the relationship between law and morality, cf. P. Devlin, *The Enforcement of Morals* (1965), H. L. A. Hart, *Law, Liberty and Morality* (1963), B. Mitchell, *Law, Morality and Religion in a Secular Society* (1967), J. N. D. Anderson, *Morality, Law and Grace* (1972).

condemnations of immorality and licentiousness to leave in no doubt what the Christian approach to pornography should be. Nevertheless the exercise of this responsibility towards society as a whole must be in accordance with a true Christian spirit. It is not to be expected that any society which is biased towards sexual freedom will take kindly to the criticisms of those within it whose standards are of a different kind. Moreover, only those who shoulder some social responsibility in other spheres have a right to voice moral judgments on their fellows.

In addition to the moral tension which arises, another tension for those who base their approach on New Testament principles is the problem of striking a right proportion between spiritual and social issues. Since the New Testament concentrates on the former there is a natural tendency to give attention to this to the neglect of social responsibilities. But as this conflicts with the nature of man as a social being, the tension is generally eased by concentrating on the Christian Community as a social group. There is some New Testament support for this view in Paul's statement in Gal. 6:10 'Let us do good to all men, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.'¹⁹ Whereas the Christian community takes preference, responsibility towards others is not, however, excluded. Indeed, a true appreciation of Paul's meaning suggests a wide acceptance of responsibility generally, although linking it with an even greater responsibility towards fellow believers. The proportioning of responsibility between the larger and the narrower group must remain a matter for individual conscience.

Some pressing issues in New Testament times could not be dealt with by direct social action. The slavery issue could not have been challenged by confrontation since the Christian church was too small and slavery was an integral part of the social and economic structure. Nevertheless the spiritual approach to slaves was bound to have repercussions on the system. The New Testament approach on this issue therefore suggests that direct involvement may not necessarily be desirable from a Christian point of view, even where the Christian must strongly condemn the moral basis of an existing system. There clearly had to come a time when direct action in the slavery issue was not only desirable but imperative.

A caution is needed regarding the Christian's identification with the world. The New Testament view of κόσμος is varied, but a strong emphasis is laid on the adverse use of the term to denote that area of human affairs which is opposed to God.²⁰ Hence Christians are exhorted to keep themselves unspotted from the world (Jas. 1:27).²¹ Such an approach has been interpreted by some Christians to indicate a policy of complete non-involvement in social affairs. But there is a vital difference between contamination and concern. It is no part of New Testament advice that the man of faith should become morally implicated in society. He must be a man apart, governed by spiritual principles which are not shared by his fellows. But this gives him a more objective basis from which to assess the 'world' around him. Jesus conceived of His followers as being the 'salt of the earth' (Matt. 5:13), by which He clearly implied that they have a salutary effect

¹⁹ Some commentators relate Paul's exhortation in Gal. 6:10 to his appeal fund for the Jerusalem poor (cf. R. A. Cole, *The Epistle of Paul to the Galatians* (1965). *ad. loc.*). But it would seem to have a wider application than this. Martin Luther, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians* (1535, Eng. ed. 1953), *ad. loc.*, applied the 'household' particularly to ministers and the rest of the faithful.

²⁰ On κόσμος see the article by H. Sasse in Kittel's *T. W. N. T.*

²¹ Cf. J. B. Mayor's comment on the 'world' in *The Epistle of James*² (1897), 218ff.

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on society.²² Christian social concern is not so much aimed at the spiritual regimentation of society, as the infusion into that society of spiritual men with concern for their fellows and yet with the moral resistance to enable them in God's strength to rise above the corruptions and social evils which they are challenging. There must always be a sense of apartness linked with the sense of involvement.

THE NEW TESTAMENT CONCEPT OF AN IDEAL SOCIETY

Although the New Testament does not give a blue print for social organisation of society as a whole, it recognises the essential social nature of man by setting out the basis for a Christian society. Indeed the only possible way of approaching social problems in a world where men do not universally acknowledge Christian principles is to begin by considering the principles which the New Testament sets out as desirable in its presentation of the Christian society and then to consider to what extent these are in any way applicable to the world at large.

The three main New Testament ideas which bring out strongly the social nature of man are the Kingdom, the Church and the Family. The first is found mainly in the teaching of Jesus, the second in the Acts and Epistles and the third finds support in both.

1. *The Kingdom Idea*

It is at once clear that the unifying factor in the New Testament concept of the Kingdom is the supreme importance of the King.²³ This is borne out by several factors. It is assumed rather than specifically stated. It is involved in the definition of βασιλεία which denotes the exercise of dominion rather than the sphere over which the dominion is exercised. This means that the focus falls essentially on the character of the rule, which is inextricably bound up with the character of the King. When Jesus said, 'Seek first God's Kingdom and his righteousness' (Matt. 6:33), the close proximity of the two ideas is evident.²⁴ The righteous character of the King is not only transferred to the Kingdom, but becomes a target for all those who are members of that Kingdom. This provides not only a unifying notion, but also a moral standard at the basis of the new society. In this respect the New Testament idea of the Kingdom finds a parallel in the Old Testament idea of the theocratic community. Both are in marked contrast to modern societies whose main attempts to find a unifying factor are based on political ideologies like capitalism and communism, neither of which have specific moral demands woven into their fabric, as the Kingdom idea has.

In the teaching of Jesus, the Kingdom is invariably known either as the Kingdom of God or the Kingdom of heaven. While the latter may appear more impersonal than the former, this would not be true in a Jewish milieu, where heaven (as in Matthew's gospel) is clearly used as

²² J. C. Fenton, *St. Matthew* (1963), 84, considers the 'the Church has a usefulness to God in making the world acceptable to him, by its sacrifice and intercession'. But this is an unwarranted interpretation. It is more probable that salt is here used in its Jewish sense of 'wisdom', in which case Christian thought is seen to have a salutary effect on social thinking (cf. D. Hill, *op. cit.*, 115).

²³ For concise surveys of the New Testament Kingdom idea, cf. G. E. Ladd, *Jesus and the Kingdom* (1964), H. Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom* (1962).

²⁴ On the subject of righteousness and the Kingdom, cf. Ridderbos, *ibid.*, 285ff.

a synonym for God. The Kingdom idea is there theocentric.²⁵ It does not primarily exist for man, although its principles are beneficial to man. It is not originated in man's mind. The sower who sowed in the first Kingdom parable could do nothing to make the seed grow. The Kingdom society was to be a community in which the members had been drawn to it by some kind of divine action. It was not a self-constituted society. Responsibility within such a society is therefore primarily to the King and only secondarily towards the fellow members of the society.

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Nevertheless, because of their common relationship towards the Inaugurator of the Kingdom, the members have an interrelationship towards each other. This is the basis of social responsibility within the Kingdom. There is clearly a greater responsibility towards fellow members than towards non-members, because of the members' common allegiance to God. But the problem arises as to the relationship of the Kingdom to society as a whole.

Jesus never taught that the Kingdom would become identical with society as a whole. The seed found no growth in certain soils. The tares are contrasted with the wheat. The relation of the good to the rest implies a tension between them. The present character of the Kingdom involves its members in decisions regarding non-members. What is applicable to those within will not always be equally applicable to those without, with the result that social responsibility must be modified accordingly. Principles which are right and practicable within the Kingdom will seem unworkable outside. Christian moral standards will not always be regarded as acceptable among those who own no allegiance to God. Yet the Christian in the 'world' cannot lower his standards to conform to the less exacting demands of society. Although finding himself at odds with his environment, he must offer some positive guidance for the rectification of social evils. The nineteenth century reformers in Britain were examples of men inspired by the principles of God's Kingdom, who nevertheless battled for better working conditions, education, abolition of slave trading, prison reform and the development of hospital services. The social conscience of that period was almost wholly the 'conscience' of those who were in the world but not of the world, God's men in an adverse society.

2. The Church Idea

The societary idea is found more fully developed in the New Testament idea of the Church, a special community of people 'called out' by God from an alien environment. Again the idea of a new society is strong. The corporate aspect is brought out in many ways, especially by the expressive ἐν Χριστῷ concept. Since all believers are in Him they bear a direct relation to each other. Moreover the requirement of faith from each member furnishes another common bond. Yet the most striking illustrations of the corporate character of the church are the use of the body, building and bride metaphors.²⁶ In the body the sense of belonging is so strong that what affects one member affects the whole.²⁷ The apostle Paul argues that no body could consist of only one member (1 Cor. 12:14ff.). He then proceeds to show that all the members should have similar care for each other (1 Cor. 12:25). There is therefore a built-in sense of

²⁵ Ridderbos, *ibid.*, 286, 287, contrasts the theocratic character of the Kingdom with the idealistic conception of it.

²⁶ Cf. E. Best, *One Body in Christ* (1955), who concentrates his discussion on the body, building and bride metaphors.

²⁷ Cf. J. A. T. Robinson, *The Body* (1957), H. Conzelmann, *An Outline of the Theology of the New Testament* (Eng. tr. 1968), 260ff., H. A. A. Kennedy, *The Theology of the Epistles* (1919), 147ff.

social responsibility within the new community of the Church. This leads to unity, but not uniformity (cf. Rom. 12:4ff.). The members exercise a variety of gifts, but these do not affect the sense of responsibility towards other members. There is no room for partiality on any grounds within the body of Christ. Since He is the Head, the body must be guided by Him.

Even more vivid is the building metaphor in which the various parts of the structure are not only built on a common foundation (i.e. Christ, 1 Cor. 3:11), but are interlinked with each other in such a way that the security of the whole depends on the stability of the parts (cf. Eph. 2:21).²⁸ This sense of solidarity gives special character to the societary concept. It is not merely an advantage

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for members of the Church to have responsibility for each other. It is a *sine qua non*. Those who show no concern for fellow-members are acting contrary to the basic principles of the ἐκκλησία. Much of Paul's correspondence with the Corinthian church arose because of lack of social consideration within the community. Some members were totally disregarding the effect of their actions on the whole, which led Paul to his famous dictum—'All things are lawful but not all things are helpful.' Disorders at the Lord's Supper were caused by essentially anti-social behaviour, the better-off members were shamefully reacting towards the poorer members, an attitude which is strongly condemned by the apostle (cf. 1 Cor. 10:14ff.). The Bride imagery is of a more personal character, but is nevertheless equally suggestive. The Bride is the church personified and as such is a community concept. The relationship of the community to the Bridegroom is one of love (Eph. 5:25ff), and this is conceived of both in respect of individual believers and in respect of the whole group. It stands to reason that members of so close a fellowship, which can be personified as a group, have strong social responsibilities towards each other.

Another aspect of the Church as a pattern society is the importance attached to leaders.²⁹ The New Testament presents no uniform system of leadership, but does inculcate respect for those in positions of responsibility (1 Thess 5:12). When bishops are mentioned they must be able to command respect not only from those within the Church, but also from those outside it (1 Tim.. 3:1-7). It is the church leaders who especially have the function of exercising social responsibility within the community.

3. The Family Idea

Another metaphor is that of the family. The Fatherhood of God is so characteristic of the New Testament that it does not need demonstrating. But its implications are far-reaching. The family analogy is essentially a society, a microcosm of society as a whole. The figure of speech is essentially human, allowing for imperfections within it. Fathers must discipline children who are not acting in the best interests of the family as a whole (cf. Heb. 12). The family idea is in fact derived from the fatherly nature of God (Eph. 3:14).³⁰ Love for one another (a recurring theme in 1 John) is based on the nature of God as love. It was this idea which caused some liberal theologians to define Christianity as belief in the fatherhood of

²⁸ For a comprehensive survey of the imagery applied to the Church, cf. P. S. Minear, *Images of the Church in the New Testament* (1960).

²⁹ Cf. O. Linton, 'Church and Office in the New Testament', in *This is the Church* (ed. A. Nygren) (1952), 100-135.

³⁰ J. A. Robinson, *op. cit.*, *ad. loc.*, takes πατρία as literally meaning 'family'.

God and the brotherhood of man. But the weakness of this approach lay in the extension of the family idea to include all mankind without regard to the basis of membership. It may certainly seem a desirable dream that all men should belong to this pattern society, but the New Testament gives no indication that this will be so. Nevertheless principles which apply to an ideal family relationship at least offer a pattern and an incentive for an approach to the problems of society as a whole.

SOME SAMPLES OF SOCIAL CONCERN

Having established the basic idea of social responsibility within the restricted Christian community, we shall now proceed to examine what evidences exist in the New Testament on the Christian view of some selected areas of life which are

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of great importance in the community as a whole. These will illustrate the application of Christian principles to a wider context. We shall concentrate on such areas as the Christian doctrine of work, responsibility towards the poor and needy, justice and politics. These specific illustrations will enable some assessment to be made of ways in which the Christian approach to modern social problems may proceed.

1. *The New Testament teaching on Work*

There is little teaching on the general idea of work in the New Testament,³¹ although there is considerable emphasis on the idea of Christian work. Indeed, Jesus described His mission as His 'work' (John 17:4), and this sets the pattern for the New Testament approach as a whole. Much of the exhortation to 'good works' is on the same basis. Effort is directed to the end of glorifying God. The approach is necessarily on a spiritual basis and can serve as no indication of principles of work in an industrialised society, which is dominated by material considerations.

The first aspect to be noted is that no distinctions are drawn in the New Testament regarding the status of various kinds of work. There is no contempt for manual work as there was among the Greeks.³² Indeed the Christian position is illustrated by both Jesus and Paul, neither of whom disdained manual work. They were both, in fact, craftsmen. When Jesus learnt the trade of carpenter and Paul the trade of tent-making, they were following a well-established Jewish tradition that all males should learn a trade, even those intending to become rabbis.³³ This respect shown to manual labour may not be as readily applicable to an age when the craftsman who can take pride in his work is giving place to lines of machine-minders who cannot as easily be convinced of the dignity of their work. Twentieth century conditions are very different from the first century conditions, but nonetheless the New Testament approach is surely still applicable. Is there justification for an order of industrialised society which makes it impossible for a man to have pride in his work and is there not a responsibility resting on the Christian church to enter the conflict to campaign for a greater dignity to be attached to work of all types? No follower of Jesus can logically place

³¹ For useful treatments of the theme of work, cf. A. Richardson, *The Christian Doctrine of Work* (1952), H. F. C. Catherwood, *The Christian in Industrial Society* (1964), W. Lillie, *op. cit.*, 105ff., J. N. D. Anderson, *Into the World*, 18ff.

³² Cf. Lillie, *op. cit.*, 110.

³³ Cf. A. Edersheim, *Sketches of Jewish Social Life* (r.p. 1960), 182ff.

mental work on a higher rung of the social ladder than manual work, since Jesus Himself did not do so. His own contemporaries despised Him because of His reputation as a carpenter (Mark 6:3), but this was more because He was in their minds 'uneducated' than because they despised His craft (cf. also the estimate of Peter and John in Acts 4:13).³⁴

The second consideration is that in the New Testament the emphasis on secular employment is not treated as an end in itself, but as contributing to the service of God.³⁵ More than once Paul claims to have supported himself by his own labours (Acts 20:34; 1 Thess. 2:9). In this case daily work is no more than a means to an end, but even so the spiritual end in view adds a dimension to the secular which is not present among those who are uncommitted to Christian service. The drabest work is transformed if it is seen to be an essential part of a man's service to God. It should be noted that the importance of secular vocation is not to be dismissed. Paul is critical of the Thessalonians because of the idleness of some of their members and declares that those who do not work are not entitled to eat (2 Thess. 3:10). This implies, of course, that work is available and that they are deliberately refusing to work on the ostensible grounds that the Parousia

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is at hand. This would be no yardstick, therefore, for those who have no choice, as when prevailing conditions make full employment impossible. As an ideal it certainly suggests that continuous unemployment is unacceptable to the Christian conscience and the Christian has some obligation to campaign against it.³⁶

The nearest parallel to the concept of 'worker' in the New Testament is δοῦλος (slave or servant) and to 'employer' is κέρτιος (slave-owner or master). The parallel has serious shortcomings in that the modern worker has considerable freedom, whereas the first century slaves had no choice at all either to offer or to withdraw their labour; nevertheless the New Testament advice to slaves throws light on the workers' approach to their responsibilities. The main advice on the subject is found in several passages in the form of 'house-tables' giving instruction on domestic arrangements.³⁷ These occur in the Captivity Epistles, the Pastoral Epistles and 1 Peter. The most striking advice is found in Col. 3:23 (cf. Eph. 6:7),³⁸ where slaves are exhorted to work heartily 'as serving the Lord and not men'. Again spiritual principles are seen to dominate a situation in which the slave had no rights and could be taken advantage of by an unscrupulous master. Paul's advice would clearly not be workable in a society in which such a high spiritual approach to work is abnormal. Ideally a Christian cannot tolerate a slipshod attitude to his work responsibility. He sees himself as answerable to God. Moreover, Paul suggests that the Christian can leave his true reward to God. This does not mean a pie-in-the-sky approach, but a realistic acceptance and use of an existing order of society which he is powerless to change. In the Pastoral Epistles, Paul makes the point that where slaves have believing masters, they should serve them all the better (1 Tim. 6:1f.). In writing to Titus, he enjoins true fidelity upon slaves so that they 'may adorn the

³⁴ Cf. F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles*² (1952), *ad. loc.*, who considers the statement in Acts 4:13 does not imply 'illiterate' but 'uneducated in the Jewish schools'.

³⁵ Cf. Lillie, *op. cit.*, 106.

³⁶ Cf. W. Temple, *Christianity and the Social Order*³ (1955), 15f.

³⁷ For a discussion of these ethical codes, cf. E. G. Selwyn, *The First Epistle of St. Peter* (1946), 419ff.

³⁸ Cf. the comments of R. P. Martin, in *Colossians: The Church's Lord and the Christian's Liberty* (1972), *ad. loc.*

doctrine of God my Saviour' (Titus 2:10). Again spiritual motives are seen to be powerful in affecting behaviour within the existing structure of society and must have been a positive influence in counteracting some of the worst features of that society.

The New Testament is not wholly concerned with slaves, although a sizeable proportion of the membership of the Christian church was probably in that category. There is advice also for the masters which places considerable social responsibility on them. The clearest example of this is Col. 4:1, where Paul says, 'Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven.' Here again a spiritual reason is given for fair treatment. The implication is that masters, as employers, are accountable to God for their actions and attitudes. In the parallel passage in Eph. 6:9 the point is made that God is both Master of slave and slave-owner alike, which puts both on the same moral footing. Masters have, in fact, less claim on their slaves than God has, a principle which was bound to have revolutionary effects on the existing system. Christian masters could in fact exert a powerful effect on the contemporary society by the force of their example in their treatment of their slaves. Those acting on New Testament principles would in their day be in the vanguard of progress towards better work relationships. The New Testament does not condemn masters for owning slaves, but makes sure that they treat the slaves with the utmost respect which the system allowed. A man like Philemon, had he acted on the advice contained in Paul's letters to him, would have set a noble example in forbearance in a society which reacted with the greatest severity against absconding slaves.³⁹

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It may be questioned whether the New Testament advice to masters has any relevance to the approach of modern employers to their labour force. There are, of course, vast differences which are at once obvious. The modern industrial scene is complicated by its own structure. Few employees have a single master to whom they are personally responsible. The 'bosses' of modern industry are generally remote from the workers and are frequently linked together in giant organisations which are utterly impersonal. Moreover, the workers are themselves linked together into unions, which again gives little scope to the individual, and are not concerned so much with matters of conscience as of material benefits. This makes it difficult for those with Christian commitments, either in management or in the unions, when issues of conscience clash with majority opinions. It is unavoidable that the Christian attitude may at times appear to be lacking in social responsibility to those whose scale of values is different. Some Christians, for example, decline to take part in strikes for conscience sake, but are then ostracised for acting against the 'common good'. The New Testament contains no specific teaching on the resolution of such tensions, but would certainly uphold the right of any man to follow the dictates of his own conscience. The importance of the individual must never be lost sight of in discussions on social responsibility. It is questionable whether a society has a right to introduce restrictive practices which militate against a man's conscience, however valuable collective action might be. This applies equally to management as to the labour force. The New Testament gives no sanction to the crushing of the individual in the industrial machine.⁴⁰

Another factor which is particularly relevant in modern times and on which certain principles are educeable from the New Testament is the problem of leisure. While it is true, as

³⁹ Cf. E. Brunner, *Justice and the Social Order* (1945), 97ff.

⁴⁰ Cf. H. F. R. Catherwood's discussion, *op. cit.*

Richardson says, that 'The Bible knows nothing of a 'problem of leisure',⁴¹ it certainly makes provision for periods of relaxation from work. The New Testament approach to the Sabbath is based on Old Testament teaching. The exposition of 'rest' in Heb. 3 and 4 follows directly from the experiences of the Israelites. It is true that the 'rest' is spiritually applied, but the historical basis of the rest is nevertheless assumed. The clearest directive concerning the whole institution of the Sabbath is found in the gospels.⁴² The strongest clashes between Jesus and His religious contemporaries were occasioned by disputes over the Sabbath. Indeed, the earliest hint of concerted action against Him (Mark 3:6) was on account of His challenging the status quo. Jesus in no sense denied to man the right to a day of rest, but was challenging the use of the day. He was against the rigidity of traditional sabbath observations which bound it up in a mass of taboos. His ruling principle was that the Sabbath was made for man (Mark 2:27),⁴³ not *vice-versa*, which meant that it was designed to be a benefit and not a burden. The principle that man cannot work continuously but needs rest from his labours has proved to be essential both to man's physical and mental state. Those who ignore this basic requirement do so at their own peril. It may be questioned how far the modern extension of leisure is desirable for man's welfare, but the New Testament gives no guidance on the problem of leisure which develops when leisure becomes too extensive. Nevertheless in line with Jewish procedure, it is assumed in the New Testament that the Sabbath will be used for spiritual purposes, yet with the proviso that the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath. The use of the seventh-day leisure is therefore conditioned by what accords with the Son of Man, which suggests that place must be found for the appropriation of

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those benefits from His mission which find their culmination in the worship of God. The social concern among Christians for their fellows in the best use of leisure must mean that often a new tension will arise when the divine merging of work and worship is in conflict with other combinations like work and sport, or work and personal enjoyment. The New Testament is certainly not opposed to personal enjoyment of a healthy kind, but assumes that a man's first duty is to God rather than to himself.

This brief survey of the New Testament approach to social responsibility in the sphere of work-relationships would not be complete without some mention of authority.⁴⁴ Because of the basic slave-master structure behind much of the teaching on the subject, the prevalence of exhortations to obedience is to be expected. Although the social structure has changed, any society which aims for stability depends on the principle of subordination in which some exercise authority and others accept it. This does not mean servile acceptance of injustice or dogged maintenance of the status quo, but it does mean that those deputed to rule may depend on the loyalty of those they rule and it should imply that the rulers are mindful of the welfare of society as a whole. In a totalitarian system, obedience within the system is enforced. In a democratic system it is assumed. Lack of all subordination in a society can only lead to anarchy in which each individual is answerable only for himself, irrespective of the welfare of the society in which he lives. There can be no doubt, therefore, that Christians in industry

⁴¹ Cf. Richardson, *op. cit.*, 53.

⁴² For a balanced comment on the Christian view of the sabbath, cf. Anderson, *op. cit.*, 24ff.

⁴³ C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Gospel according to St. Mark* (1959), in commenting on Mark 2:27 takes the statement as a Markan comment. But V. Taylor, *The Gospel according to St. Mark* (1953), *ad. loc.*, does not reject the view that Jesus could have said it.

⁴⁴ Cf. Richardson, *op. cit.*, 51, 52.

should be worthy examples of the giving of respect where it is due. It would be contrary to Christian principles to act in a way, or incite others to act in a way which threatened the real stability of the social order. Deliberate disruption of industry for purposes of personal gain is difficult to square with the New Testament principle of doing all 'as to the Lord'. The Christian would need to make sure that such disruptive action did not deliberately affect adversely other members of society who were not directly concerned with the dispute. There are times when rights must be subjugated to responsibilities.

2. *The New Testament approach to the poor and needy*

There have been few societies in which there have been no underprivileged people and, therefore, the problems of the attitude of the rest of society towards its less fortunate members is always pressing. The New Testament furnishes certain guidelines for a Christian approach to social welfare.

First, it may be noted that Jesus Himself was poor and consequently had sympathetic understanding of the position of others in similar circumstances. In the beatitudes, in Luke's version, there is a special blessing for 'the poor', although in Matthew's text this is qualified as 'the poor in Spirit'.⁴⁵ This gives an understanding which accords better with the general spiritual tenor of the beatitudes. Jesus was not placing a premium on poverty. It must be recognised that the religious use of the word 'poor' has support from the Old Testament and Jewish sources. Nevertheless it was no part of the mission of Jesus to deal with the economic position of the underprivileged. His mission was not political but spiritual. Spiritual condition cannot be identified with social or economic standing. Many of the rich are more spiritually impoverished than many of the poor. Jesus acknowledged the difficulty of rich men in coming into the Kingdom (Mark 10:24, 25), but He did not condemn riches as such, only their wrong use

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and man's wrong attitude towards them (Luke 12:15). 'The condemnation of covetousness has an important bearing on a Christian's approach to his own possessions. It also influences the way in which he looks at material prosperity in society as a whole. When Jesus advised the rich young ruler to sell his possessions and give to the poor (Luke 18:22), He was not giving a general directive to all His followers, but specific advice to one whose great weakness was too great a love of his riches.'⁴⁶ The incident does, however, bring out the concern which Jesus had for the poor.

The question of almsgiving as a social responsibility is also raised in the Sermon on the Mount. The giving of alms is assumed, but Jesus comments on the importance of the manner of it (Matt. 6:2-4). In condemning ostentatious giving, He showed the significance of motive in the dissemination of social benefits. Secret almsgiving is warmly recommended. In an age when no welfare state existed, this would have been a tremendous boon to the poor. It is an approach which excludes all possibility of a patronising attitude. The Christian is not to seek

⁴⁵ Cf. Luke 6:20 and Matt. 5:3. I. H. Marshall, *Luke: Historian and Theologian* (1970), 122, 123, regards the 'poor' as indicating those whose wants cannot be supplied by earthly helpers, which would include the idea of Matthew's 'poor in spirit'. E. E. Ellis, *The Gospel of Luke* (1966), *ad. loc.*, regards the 'poor' as the voluntary poor.

⁴⁶ Commenting on Luke 18:22, W. Manson, *The Gospel of Luke* (1930), favours the view that Jesus may have desired to make the man a member of his band of disciples and for this reason made his request.

praise from men for the largesse with which he expresses his social concern for the under privileged.

Similar teaching and similar examples are found in the Acts and Epistles. The maintenance of widows was a social problem which the Christians at once faced with reference to their own members (Acts 6). No indication is given whether they extended their care and concern to widows with no connection with the church, but it is probable that resources did not stretch to this extent. In 1 Tim. 5 advice is given about the support of widows. Those able to fend for themselves and those with relatives capable of supporting them are excluded. There appears to have been a register for widows over sixty who had proved themselves by their service to others. It would seem certain, therefore, that the sense of social responsibility was strong towards those within the fellowship who were in real need.

The earliest experiment in Christian communal living (Acts 2:43ff.; 4:32) shows a high degree of social concern among the members, although the motive for the experiment was undoubtedly spiritual rather than social. It was the impulse to share their common faith more closely which induced the idea of common possessions. There was probably no calculation about the economic viability of the scheme and certainly no economic theory comparable to the basis of modern communism. It is significant that nothing further is heard of the experiment. The epistles contain no hint that it should be emulated. Indeed, the organisation of a collection scheme for the Jerusalem church (Rom. 15:25; 1 Cor. 16:1-4; 2 Cor. 8:9) suggests that the experiment may have led to the impoverishment of the Christians there.⁴⁷ The apostle Paul was clearly enthusiastic about his relief scheme and was disappointed when the Corinthians were tardy about making an adequate contribution to it. He argues from a theological basis for liberality, but it is noticeable that the recipients are to be the 'saints'.

When the Christians at Antioch heard Agabus' prophecy of coming famine 'throughout the whole world' (Acts 11:28), their thoughts were immediately awakened to the needs of their brethren in Judaea. It was again the limited responsibility within the Christian body which found expression in a contribution being made. In view of the fact that the famine had only been prophesied and was not yet an established fact, the speed with which the relief fund was organised speaks highly for the social concern of the Antioch Christians.

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In writing to the Galatians, Paul mentions that the 'pillar apostles' agreed to his commission as apostle to the Gentiles, making only the proviso that he and Barnabas should remember the poor (Gal. 2:10). But he gives no indication of the character of these poor. It is most natural to suppose that he is thinking mainly of Christians and especially of the Judaeans Christians.

The essentially practical letter of James has various comments on this subject. The concept of pure religion is that which expresses itself in social concern towards orphans and widows (James 1:27). Whereas no mention is made of material assistance, it is most probable that 'visitation' involved some contribution towards material needs, especially in view of Jas. 2:15, 16, where the turning away of the destitute brother and sister is condemned. Indeed James maintains that social concern is an essential expression of a living faith. Mere

⁴⁷ Cf. G. Duncan, *St. Paul's Ephesian Ministry* (1929), 229ff., in which he discusses in some detail Paul's collection scheme for the saints.

orthodoxy without compassion for the needy is seen as dead. But it is again significant that the concern is illustrated from within the Christian family. An incidental reference in Paul's letter to Philemon supports the same view (cf. Philem. 7).

It would seem, therefore, that a differentiation is found in the New Testament between members of the Christian community and the general public. It has already been pointed out from Gal. 6:10 that although the first responsibility lies within the community, concern for others is not excluded. Among Christians there is a bond of unity which strengthens human compassion and provides a powerful motive for social concern (cf. Rom. 12:13).

Some comment should be made on the New Testament approach to personal wealth, since this has a direct bearing on the subject in hand. There is the strongest condemnation of the rich who oppress the poor (Jas. 5:1ff.). Similarly covetousness and extortion are condemned (1 Cor. 5:9ff.). Spiritual values are always of greater consequence than material possessions. Jesus taught that men should lay up treasure in heaven rather than on earth, where corruptive influences have a deteriorating effect upon it (Matt. 5:19ff.).

Closely akin to concern for the socially deprived is the frequently repeated New Testament injunction to offer hospitality.⁴⁸ One of the marks of the Christian is that he practices hospitality (Rom. 12:13). It is noticeable that this is closely connected with contributing to the needs of the saints. The earliest Christians appear to have observed 'open house' (Acts 2:46), and all the early meetings must have been household groups (cf. Rom. 16:5, 10; Philem. 1). Hospitality is concentrated on fellow believers (1 Pet. 4:9). Although Heb. 13:1 recommends the practice of showing hospitality to strangers on the grounds that some have unknowingly entertained angels (an obvious allusion to Abraham, Gen. 18:1ff.; 19:1ff.), the strangers would probably be unknown Christians.⁴⁹

3. The New Testament view of Justice

A major part of any man's approach to social responsibility is his view of justice. What is considered socially desirable is not always directly related to what is morally right. Yet in the New Testament a standard of justice is assumed and there is a clear differentiation between what is right and what is wrong. There are echoes of the Old Testament view of social justice as in the condemnation of oppression in James' letter mentioned above. The approach to law in general in the New Testament is intricately bound up with the Mosaic Law, which makes extensive provision for social justice.⁵⁰ Jesus upheld the sanctity of the Law,

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declaring that not one part of it should fail (Matt. 5:17, 18).⁵¹ Paul describes the law as holy (Rom. 7:12), in spite of his view that it could never effect salvation for anyone. The

⁴⁸ For the pressing need for Christians to offer hospitality to their brethren, cf. J. Moffatt, *Epistle to the Hebrews* (I.C.C.) (1924), *ad. loc.*

⁴⁹ In view of the close connection in this passage between love to the brethren and hospitality, it is natural to understand 'strangers' in the sense of Christian strangers (cf. E. C. Wickham, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (1910), *ad. loc.*).

⁵⁰ An analysis of the use of νόμος in Paul's letters show that he frequently although by no means always equated the word with the Mosaic law.

⁵¹ Cf. G. Bornkamm in *Tradition and Interpretation in Matthew* (Bornkamm, Barth and Held) (1960), 64ff., for an exposition of the view that Matthew has developed the tradition here. E. P. Blair, *Jesus in the Gospel of*

importance of this evidence of the sanctity of the law is that it provides a sound basis for social action. For a stable society law is indispensable, although it is essential for law to be non-repressive if it is to achieve this stability.⁵² Law may be used by dictators to further their own ends at the expense of the true welfare of the society. The New Testament demand for justice based on the moral character of God would prevent this and would ensure that what is just is good for society.

The trial of Jesus is portrayed in the New Testament as a miscarriage of justice.⁵³ Pilate's pathetic attempt to absolve himself of responsibility for justice bears eloquent witness to the impossibility of doing so. Although Christians came at once to recognise a theological significance in the injustice, as the just died for the unjust (1 Pet. 3:18), nevertheless the fact of the miscarriage of justice remains imprinted on New Testament thought. Indeed, if the trial were to be considered just it would be impossible to maintain the sinlessness of Jesus. It follows, therefore, that human justice is seen to be particularly fallible, which supports the need for a more objective standard of judgment if social standards are to be maintained, and it is precisely this that the New Testament provides.

Certainly law is seen as restraint. Civil magistrates have the task of resisting the bad elements in society and encouraging the good (Rom. 13:2, 3). This touches on the important function of law and order in society. There is no support in the New Testament for anarchy. Anarchy is an enemy to social justice and places society as a whole at the mercy of any opportunist who temporarily gains enough control to impose his will on the majority. Although the Christian church is not a democracy, neither is it an autocracy. Indeed the one instance mentioned in the New Testament where one man sought to lord it over the community is regarded with strong disfavour (3 John 9:10). The New Testament idea of the church is a community in which God not man is the Head (Col. 1:18; Eph. 1:22). It is theocratic not democratic. Its sense of law and order is dominated by God's will (cf. 1 Cor. 5:3-5) and in this respect it cannot provide a pattern, except in an ideal sense, for a society which does not acknowledge the government of God. Nevertheless the fact that even secular magistrates are seen as ministers of God is evidence that the Christian is obliged to come to terms with society as a whole. The Corinthians' practice of taking court cases against fellow Christians to pagan courts is criticised not on the grounds of the incompetence of pagan magistrates, but because of the incongruousness of pagans having to arbitrate between Christian brethren (1 Cor. 6).⁵⁴

The most important aspect of justice in the New Testament is seen in the exercise of authority. Whether it is in the family or in the state, it is assumed that some must exercise authority while others accept a subordinate position. Children are expected to obey their parents and slaves their masters (Col. 3:20ff.). Citizens are expected to be subject to the government (Rom. 13:1). In other words the exercise of authority is unquestioned. But it is pre-supposed that it will be used in a just manner. Fathers must not provoke children and masters must treat

Matthew (1960), 116-124, without discussing origins, concludes that Matthew at any rate understood Jesus' high regard for a true attitude to the Law.

⁵² Cf. Brunner, *op. cit.*

⁵³ For two studies of the trial of Jesus from diverging points of view, cf. D. R. Catchpole, *The Trial of Jesus* (1971) and P. Winter, *On the Trial of Jesus* (1961). The latter, who is a Jewish writer, is highly critical of the Gospel accounts.

⁵⁴ F. F. Bruce, *1 and 2 Corinthians* (1971), commenting on 1 Cor. 6:1, points out that as every Jewish community had its *bet-din*, the least the Christians could do was to do the same.

their servants justly and fairly (Col. 3:21; 4:1). Since ultimate authority comes from God, its exercise must be in harmony with His character. This is implicitly understood even when applied to the State. If the government passes legislation

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which is contrary to a man's Christian conscience, the New Testament would not expect obedience to that legislation, for no one can serve both God and Mammon (Matt. 6:24).⁵⁵

4. The New Testament approach to Politics

It is at once clear that the New Testament is not a political manifesto. Indeed its kingdom teaching is essentially spiritual. Instead of a pattern for society based on a political programme, the New Testament concerns itself with a redeemed community whose characteristics appear idealistic to those outside the realm of faith.

Some have seen in the person of Jesus a revolutionary because He so strongly challenged the status quo of His own times.⁵⁶ Certainly He was strongly critical of the religious leadership, which also exercised considerable political power. Nevertheless Jesus would not allow the crowds to make Him King (John 6:15). Although His approach to the establishment was revolutionary in principle, His mission was not to be accomplished by political action. His example, therefore, gives no indication of what the Christian approach to politics should be. Certain reforms are more within reach of spiritual than of political methods. Man's social conscience needs awakening before some programmes can be carried out. This happened when slavery was abolished,⁵⁷ or factory conditions were improved. The teaching of Jesus can certainly be a handmaid to political action, even if such action found no positive place in His mission.

The use of violence for the effecting of social reforms finds no support in the New Testament.⁵⁸ Jesus discouraged His disciples from the use of the sword (Luke 22:36-38). Moreover, Christians are urged to live at peace with all men. Social reform cannot be achieved if this fundamental principle is ignored. Methods which engender strife involve the violation of human rights.⁵⁹

Some mention has already been made of New Testament reference to the State and all that needs to be said here is that it is nowhere considered to be necessarily opposed to God. Christian citizens have the obligation to give allegiance to the State and to pray for the State (cf. 1 Tim. 2:2). This latter action is with a view to leading 'a quiet and peaceable life'. It is acknowledged that governors are ideally appointed to punish wrongdoers and praise loyal citizens (1 Pet. 2:13). This is the essence of good government. The New Testament acknowledges, however, that not all government is good, for the Apocalypse portrays the State as an opponent of the people of God and as an ally of the 'Beast'. Clearly some

⁵⁵ On Matt. 6:24, Bonnard, *op. cit.*, shows that there is no provision for partial attachment. The demand is always for complete loyalty to one view or the other. 'Mammon' clearly stands here for wealth (cf. M'Neile, *op. cit.*, *ad. loc.*).

⁵⁶ Cf. S. G. F. Brandon, *Jesus and the Zealots. A Study of the Political Factor in Primitive Christianity* (1967).

⁵⁷ Cf. Brunner, *op. cit.*, 97ff.

⁵⁸ Not all would agree with this statement. Cf. the full discussion in Ellul, *op. cit.*

⁵⁹ Cf. C. E. B. Cranfield, 'The Christian's Political Responsibility according to the New Testament', *S.J.T.* 15 (1962), 176-192.

discernment is needed to determine the extent to which a Christian's allegiance to the State can be expected.

Social responsibility is to some extent linked with the subject of taxes. Although rejecting any obligation to pay the Temple taxes, Jesus nevertheless did not refuse to pay (Matt. 17:24ff.). Paul includes a specific injunction to the Romans to pay taxes on the grounds that the authorities who extract them are 'ministers of God' (Rom. 13:6, 7). But the problem arises whether the obligation to pay taxes carries with it any obligation for Christians to interest themselves in the administration of the taxes. There is certainly no indication in the New Testament that Christians cannot be numbered among the authorities who are 'ministers of God'. It is a reasonable supposition that, where possible, Christians should exercise their right to vote, both nationally and locally, for by so doing they can exert some influence

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on the spending of the taxes to which they have contributed. This is no insignificant part of Christian social responsibility. The New Testament, however, gives no guidance on whether Christians should enter local or national politics. This leaves everyone responsible for making his own decisions within the framework of his Christian conscience. There can be no barring of active participation on the grounds of New Testament teaching.

METHODS OF SOCIAL REFORM

Because the New Testament is silent on this issue, some have concluded that no action should be taken. But where no direct advice is given on any activity or attitude, it is left to the individual to decide. Those who decide that Christians should not concern themselves in any direct way with social reforms, cannot however, avoid being members of society and must, therefore, come to terms with this fact. There are certain comments that can be made in connection with methods that are worth pondering.

In the first place the use of violence is ruled out. Force finds no basis in the teaching of Jesus and His followers, for peace, not strife, is the main characteristic of His mission. In spite of His repudiation of force, Jesus did not hesitate to be forthright in His denunciation of social evils. Moreover, violence is a violation of the rights of the individual. The New Testament urges respect for others, whereas violent action is always indiscriminate.⁶⁰

Another important aspect of the New Testament approach is the advocacy of true freedom, which directly arises from its teaching regarding the value of individuals.⁶¹ The Christian ideal is that every man must be given the opportunity to develop to the full the potential he possesses. This is admittedly idealistic, because every man is not sufficiently orientated to the common good to make the right choices. Freedom in the Christian sense does not mean unrestrained liberty of choice, but choice within the limits of God's plan. In a society which does not acknowledge the centrality of God's methods, freedom cannot have its full scope. The New Testament presents only one solution—conversion—which brings with it true freedom (Gal. 5:1). Nevertheless even an alien society cannot fail to be affected by the

⁶⁰ Ellul, *op. cit.*, 133ff., makes the point that violence may sometimes explode facades in a society, but cannot promote a free society.

⁶¹ On the subject of freedom, cf. Brunner, *op. cit.*, 54ff.

attitude of those of its members who form part of it, but who do not share its spirit. Much social reform has been achieved or at least facilitated in this indirect way.

The importance of love in social responsibility cannot be over-emphasised. Love excludes acrimony and bitterness and looks for the best even in those who adopt a different point of view. This is frequently enjoined in the New Testament. Christians are to love one another. Such a conception does not come within the normal relationships within a society. It is clearly lacking in industrial relations, both among management and among the unions. Is it too much to expect that Christians might bring some influence to bear on industry by the power of love? Such an expectation is too idealistic to be taken as a serious possibility. Nevertheless, love is a pervasive force which has supplied the motive for many far-reaching social reforms. It was Christian love for unfortunate orphans which impelled Bacnacda to start his orphanage. Similarly, Christian love inspired Elizabeth Fry to compassion for prisoners and Wilberforce to action on behalf of slaves. Admit-

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tedly in all these cases love was followed by action. But motive power is the most important feature of Christian social responsibility.

Because service to others occupies an important place in the Christian church, the concept of service to the wider community comes naturally. The Christian sees the challenge of bearing the burdens of others, and must seriously consider what action he should take. Social relief and social reform are not the gospel, but they flow naturally from it.

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