

KEY IDEA 3: CHRISTIANS HAVE A RESPONSIBILITY IN AND FOR THE WORLD

Since the God to whom the Christian belongs is the same God to whom all the earth, all domestic, political, and economic life belongs, the Christian has no reason to withdraw from the world of the world – either out of timidity or out of aloofness – but every reason to make the world’s work his own, as a worker together with God. Thus as the Christian awaits the new age he is already busy with its kind of life, here and now.

(Schnabel: Lutheran Education 98 (1963), 448)

HUMAN BEINGS AS GOD’S STEWARDS IN THE WORLD

Human beings are created ‘in the image of God’ (Gen 1:27). Part of what is understood by this is that human beings function as God’s representatives in the world and are accountable to God for the care and protection of all of God’s creation, human beings, the animals and the natural and humanly constructed environments (cf **CL1**).

Care and protection of the world

Although human beings as God’s stewards were given responsibility to ‘rule over’, ‘subdue’, and ‘have dominion over’ God’s creation (Gen 1:28), they were also commanded to ‘work and take care of’ and ‘till and keep’ it (Gen 2:15). This means that they cannot simply use or abuse God’s creation for their own benefit, but are to care for and protect what God has entrusted to them (cf **CL1**).

Human beings are also invited by God to share in the joy of creation (eg Ps 104). Not only are they urged to enjoy creation, but also to join in praising God with and on behalf of creation (eg Pss 19:1–6; 148).

The impact of human sinfulness

Sin has destroyed the original harmony and perfection of God’s world (cf **CL1**). This has impacted on all relationships within creation (Gen 3:14–19). Creation now waits to ‘be set free from its bondage’ under which it ‘has been groaning’ (Rom 8:18–23). Human beings continue to add to the suffering of creation through their sinful actions, leading to pollution of the environment, land degradation, the loss of endangered species, and the increasing ecological crisis.

People also add to the suffering of others through their actions. The Bible speaks out against those who exploit others, mistreat others, use others for their own purposes, and show lack of care and concern for others in their suffering and difficulties (eg Isa 3:14–15; Jer 5:26–28; Amos 8:1–7). Jesus’ teaching about the last judgment shows how important he regarded the care and compassion shown to the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick and the prisoner: ‘just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me’ (Matt 25:40). ‘Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful’ (Luke 6:36).

People may also cause suffering for themselves through their own actions (eg substance abuse, sexual promiscuity, unwillingness to forgive, etc). While Jesus was quick to point out the dangerous fallacy of trying to link specific cases of suffering to particular causes (John 9:1–3), people do contribute to their own suffering through actions which ignore the boundaries God has provided for human protection in his law. The ten commandments, for example, indicate situations which people may need to address in their own lives to deal with circumstances of their own suffering.

The Old Testament teaching on ‘wisdom’ and ‘foolishness’ is also helpful here (cf Proverbs). God, who created order out of chaos to bring the world into being, still preserves and sustains that creation. It is God who has provided the framework in which creation operates, and God’s design directs and controls that creation. Wisdom grows from recognising the patterns God has incorporated into his creation and from living in harmony with God’s will for creation. Knowledge of God, and the knowledge which God gives also through the gift of reason, provide the context in which wisdom develops: ‘the Lord gives wisdom; and from his mouth come knowledge and understanding’ (Prov 2:6). Only the ‘fool’ does not recognise God and the boundaries which he has set (Ps 14:1; 53:1).

THEOLOGY OF THE CROSS AND CHRISTIAN RESPONSIBILITY

Theology of the cross provides the motivation for a Christian response to situations and circumstances in the world (cf **CL2**). In becoming a human being, Jesus Christ identified with people in their weakness and suffering. He still does so. While the suffering of Jesus Christ on the cross for the sins of the world was ‘once for all’ (Heb 10:10,14), nevertheless Jesus continues to suffer with his suffering people. Hymn 761 (Lutheran Hymnal with Supplement) expresses this in verse 4:

In every insult, rift, and war,
where colour, scorn, or wealth divide,
he [Christ] suffers still, yet loves the more,
and lives, though ever crucified.

Christ asks Christians to join with him in identifying with those who are suffering and defenceless. He also empowers them through the Holy Spirit. Christians who have experienced forgiveness and reconciliation through the cross of Christ will also seek to take that forgiveness and reconciliation into the world also in the day-to-day circumstances of life, exploring the relationship of justification and justice.

THE TWO HANDS OF GOD – JUSTICE AND MERCY

Lutheran theology speaks about God operating in the world using ‘two hands’ in order to deal with the problem of sin and evil. One ‘hand’ (the ‘left hand’) sees God working with the law in the realm of the state in order to maintain peace and good order and keep sin and evil in check. This is the realm of justice, through which God shows his love and care for the world. The other ‘hand’ (the ‘right hand’) sees God operating through the church in the world with the gospel of forgiveness. This is the realm of mercy. God’s ‘left hand work’ is sometimes seen as his ‘alien work’, because God’s nature is to forgive, his ‘proper work’ (his ‘right hand work’).

Although Christians are concerned with the work of God’s ‘right hand’ in spreading the good news of forgiveness in Jesus Christ, Christians are also involved in God’s ‘left hand’ work. They are involved in the ‘left hand kingdom’ as a catalyst for social justice, demonstrating the desire to help create ‘shalom’, peace, and wholeness, and using the law (‘political use’) to protect and preserve God’s creation and help it to function in the way God wants it to. This is part of their ‘vocation’ as Christians (cf **CL2**).

Peace and justice

Establishing and maintaining peace and justice in the world is the concern of all people, not only Christians. However, Christians have a particular responsibility and motivation for this which flows from the gospel, which proclaims Jesus Christ as the one who has brought peace into the broken world. He is the ‘Prince of Peace’ (Isa 9:6) through whom we are reconciled to God and to one another. Through his Holy Spirit, Christians are empowered to work for peace and reconciliation with all people. The gospel is the power that can change human nature, so that peace, reconciliation and justice become realities.

Peace (‘shalom’) does not simply mean the absence of war (although it includes that). It relates to the total wellbeing and ‘wholeness’ of every person. Justice includes upholding the rights of every individual person. It recognises the fundamental dignity of all human beings as those who have been created and redeemed by God.

Christian social welfare

The work of Christians in social welfare, for example, grows out of the ‘right hand’ work of God in the church, but is developed in partnership with governments and other charitable organisations. In this way God operates in the world through both Christians and non-Christians as they function as ‘God’s hands’, acting justly and compassionately for the good of all.

Through the ministry of caring, Christians can make incarnate God’s message of love in Christ. Care is offered graciously and unconditionally because the neighbour is in need of care and support, in the same way that the gospel is proclaimed ‘without strings attached’.

A prophetic role

Christians need to exercise a prophetic role in society, pointing out specific sins of a society and nation, opposing social trends or proposed legislation, and calling society to repentance.

Speak out for those who cannot speak,
for the rights of all the destitute.
Speak out, judge righteously,
defend the rights of the poor and needy.

(Prov 31:8–9)

Christians need to become aware of sin as a social and systemic evil as well as a personal reality. Injustice becomes entrenched in structures and systems which oppress people and violate creation rather than serve them. While Christians are to respect and obey proper authority, there may be cases where those in power enact laws which support or practise obvious injustice. In such cases, Christians are called on to ‘obey God rather than human beings’ (Acts 4:19).

Some issues and questions for discussion and reflection:

- In what ways does the Lutheran school promote education for social consciousness?
- How do Lutheran schools develop an awareness of and sensitivity to suffering in the world and help students to identify with the weak, the vulnerable, and the suffering?
- Should any student be excluded from a Lutheran school because they cannot afford the fees?
- How can a school administrator help to deal with a teacher who is struggling to reach an acceptable level of competence? How can a teacher deal with a struggling student?
- How can students be helped to deal with suffering which relates to circumstances under their own control (eg substance abuse)?
- In what way is the concept of God's 'two hands' useful in helping members of the school community, whether they are Christians or not, understand their responsibility for promoting and working for social justice in the world?
- How do we see the relationship between 'justification' and 'justice'?
- What role does the Lutheran school have in the social welfare ministry of the church?
- In what ways can Lutheran schools exercise a prophetic role in the field of education generally?

References and further reading:

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LCA *Doctrinal Statements and Theological Opinions of the Lutheran Church of Australia* [The two kingdoms and social ethics]

<http://www.lca.org.au/resources/cticr/dsto2revi5.pdf> [One loving God: two hands – saving and caring]

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