

Follow

me

EXPLORING MORE OF OUR CALLING AS CHRISTIANS



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Published by
Evangelical Mennonite Conference
440 Main Street, Steinbach, MB R5G 1Z5
www.emconference.ca

April 2006



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PREFACE

Follow Me! That's Christ's call to each of us. This booklet is a modest attempt to respond to Christ's call in the midst of our world today. Our Christian faith is to be shown in discipleship that is rooted in Scripture and concerned about social justice (addressing inequities) in our world.

Franklin H. Littell, a Methodist scholar who knows Anabaptist history intimately, has said, "The tragedy of the 'Radical Reformation' was that, in good part as a result of savage persecution, it withdrew from the world for which Christ died." How are we responding today to "the world for which Christ died"?

While respectful of EMC official statements and unofficial sentiments, this booklet does not purport to offer official positions on various matters; it is a discussion guide, aware that there are various opinions on many matters it contains.

It occupies a humbler stance than that of *The Christian Life* booklet, our baptism and membership instruction guide. And it was prepared with a wider audience in mind—older, more mature believers (while remaining valuable to teenagers and newer believers). It is designed for use by all of our churches in various settings—Sunday school, youth groups, Bible studies, care groups, and retreats.

The booklet's topics were not randomly chosen; at the same time, other topics were left out. More topics could be covered in a companion volume. But all topics were selected with the

conviction that Jesus cares much about social justice in our world, and that our faith must be practical or it risks being pronounced hollow by Him.

This booklet is prepared by authority of the Education Committee, Board of Church Ministries. The BCM is responsible to "provide resources and services to help congregations with Christian education" (*Constitution*, p. 37). It is also supported by the national Social Concerns Committee, Board of Leadership and Outreach. The BLO is responsible "to identify and respond to spiritual and social concerns" (*Constitution*, p. 36).

Grapple with the writers' opinions; more importantly consider carefully the Scriptures referred to. This booklet is deliberately geared toward your direct study of Scripture on various matters.

Through Scripture we become aware of the revelation of God in history—through Israel, in the Early Church, and ultimately and supremely in Jesus Christ our Lord. Scripture is God's Word written, our final authority in faith and practice. By reading Scripture and listening together in common reliance upon God's Spirit, we can discern more of what Christ calls us to do today when he says, "Follow Me!"

Education Committee,
Board of Church Ministries

Social Concerns Committee,
Board of Leadership and Outreach

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Board of Church Ministries acknowledges the many efforts behind this project. Special thanks go to Becky Buhler, BCM administrative assistant, for her work on design, layout and editing. Among special mention are members of the editing committee: Diane Koop, Bill Rambo, Ward Parkinson, Gerald Reimer, and Terry Smith. Gratitude is expressed to Ron Kroeker for help with cover design. Our thanks go to chapter writers who have contributed and then waited patiently for this project to come to completion. Our thanks go to Esther Epp-Tiessen, MCC Canada's peace ministries coordinator, for suggesting some resources for teachers. Credit and thanks also go to the service DesignPics (www.designpics.com) for the photos used here with permission.

1 WHY STICK TO THE GOSPEL?

How full is the message we live and share?

Terry M. Smith

Jesus said, “Repent and believe the good news.”

(Mark 1:15)

“Therefore go and make disciples... teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.”

(Matthew 28:18–20)

“If you want to preach only to our souls, go to the place of the dead. That is the only place where body and soul are separate. Here on earth, to reach my soul, you cannot neglect my body.”

– Pastor Samuel Yameogo
Federation of Evangelical Churches
Burkina Faso

Many Christians are comfortable with personal forgiveness and gathering together. Many give to charity, some sacrificially. But do we strive for social justice? Some do, while others are skeptical of it. Yet, along with quietly living out our faith, the Church needs to be concerned about social justice.

Canadian theologian Douglas John Hall says that when North American Christians attempt to move “beyond private to social forms of guilt,” we often doubt anything can change.

Discuss: What’s the difference between charity and justice?

Christians in Canada and the United States know we benefit at other people’s expense, want to see others prosperous and happy, and express indignation at how animals and nature are exploited. But Hall says we often switch off “our twinges of guilt” by saying that the world’s problems are inevitable: “It’s the way the cookie crumbles.”



Are we prepared to look at society's structures to which we contribute and that add to the world's pain?

“Since ‘the cookie’ has so conveniently crumbled to the advantage of the rich,” says the former professor at McGill University, “we are highly unlikely to protest against this fate and even less likely to counter it by allowing the incipient guilt concerning the poor to do its proper work” (*Professing the Faith*, Fortress Press, 1993, pp. 471–472). Hall expresses concern when Christ’s atonement is used to avoid facing social guilt (p. 428).

Put it this way: When we come to Christ, we are forgiven for our private sins and go home feeling in right relationship with God and the Church. But we do not readily consider our North American role in creating some of today’s global inequalities. As a result, we remain in wrong relationship with much of the world, and our attitudes don’t change just because we become Christians.

Are we prepared to look at society’s structures to which we contribute and that add to the world’s pain?

We properly proclaim that God’s love is revealed by Jesus’ dying to remove sin’s barrier and to avert His righteous anger by assuming the punishment we deserved (Galatians 2:20–21, 3:13; 2 Corinthians 5:21; Romans 3:23–26; 1 John 4:10–12; Isaiah 53:4–6). But when God so loved “the world” that He sent His Son (John 3:16), He loved the *cosmos*, the whole created order. Christ’s coming speaks to body and soul, individual and community, church and world, planet and universe.

Discuss: How do we bring together grace and justice in our practice and teaching?

Christ’s coming and the Church’s response have led to many people’s salvation—forgiveness, wholeness, and freedom. Yet some Christians have used Scripture to defend evils—slavery and The Crusades. Re-examining the accuracy of our message and actions is critical (2 Corinthians 13:5). How are we using Scripture today?

“Jesus said that if we do not feed the hungry and clothe the naked, we go to hell,” says Dr. Ronald Sider. “If anything is clear from Scripture, it’s this: God’s people have a special responsibility to care for the poor. But does this

evangelical community—the people of the Book—reflect this in the priorities, lives and budgets of our churches and people? Are we known for our compassion to the weak?” (*Evangelicals in the Balance*, www-esa-online.org).

We curiously avoid what Scripture says. Four men with leprosy discover abundant food. They eat and then alert the starving city of Samaria (2 Kings 6–7). Why do pastors shift the passage’s focus from physical food to spiritual food? Is it partly because our pastors have full refrigerators and do not fear physical starvation?

Discuss: How self-serving is the theology of the North American evangelical church?

Paul speaks of a collection (1 Corinthians 16:1–3), which leaders use to promote the local budget, yet the apostle assists Christians suffering elsewhere from famine (Acts 11:28–30; Romans 15:25–26). Shifting a passage’s focus diverts us from desperate needs. To claim to proclaim “the whole will of God” (Acts 20:27) is to be judged by how we act and teach.

The “nations” stand before Jesus, some surprised by Jesus’ words: “Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire.” To ignore the hungry, thirsty, stranger, naked, sick, and imprisoned is to ignore Christ. Those commended

are surprised, rather than expectant (Matthew 25:31–46). Where does that leave us?

Are we trained to miss Scripture’s emphasis on social justice?

“He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8). “Seek good, not evil, that you may live. Then the Lord Almighty will be with you, just as you say he is. Hate evil, love good; maintain justice in the courts” (Amos 5:14–15).

God rebuked Shallum, king of Judah, who built “his palace by unrighteousness” through enforced labour. Previously, King Josiah did what was “right and just,” defending the poor and needy. “Is this not what it means to know me?” (Jeremiah 22:13–16).

Discuss: It’s said that Scripture contains 2,400 references to the poor. How often are the poor mentioned in your congregation?

The Apostle James says “rich people” are to “weep and wail” because they have “lived in luxury and self-indulgence,” failed to pay “the workers who mowed your fields,” and “fattened yourselves” for slaughter (James 5:1–6). What situations today deserve such rebuke? One

example is executives who prosper after their company collapses and workers' pensions disappear.

It's said that while giving a person a fish feeds them for a day, teaching them to fish feeds them for a lifetime. It's replied, though, that this partly depends on who controls access to the fish, to the market, and the price for which the fish are sold.

Discuss: How do people respond to Word without deed, or deed without Word?

Despite PowerPoint and worship bands, worship is more than song. Without our seeking justice in society, our music becomes offensive to God: "Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps. But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream" (Amos 5:23-24).

Let's pray for society's awakening and for church revival (2 Chronicles 7:14), yet fasting is empty if isolated from justice among God's people. Proper fasting is to "loose the chains of injustice...to set the oppressed free...to share your food with the hungry, to provide the wanderer with shelter, to clothe the naked, and care for your flesh and blood" (Isaiah 58:1-6).

Jesus came to "preach Good News to the poor...to

proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour" (Luke 4:18-19; Isaiah 61:1-2). Do we see here the spiritual, physical, and social needs?

Faith without works remains dead (James 2:26). When Paul met church leaders in Jerusalem, he was asked to "continue to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do" (Galatians 2:10).


Meeting physical and social needs honours the Word who became flesh (John 1:14). The Church's striving for social justice educates both rich (including the middle class) and poor on our responsibilities and needs. As Jesus gave his life for us, we are to give our lives and our material possessions to help the needy (1 John 3:16-18).

Discuss: What does your church's budget say about your congregational practice and message of social justice?

Menno Simons wrote, "True evangelical faith...cannot lie dormant...it seeks and serves and fears God; it clothes the naked, it feeds the hungry; it comforts the sorrowful; it shelters the destitute; it aids and consoles the sad... it teaches, admonishes and reproveth with the Word of the Lord; it seeks that which is lost" (*Complete Writings*, p. 307).

Notes:

Menno cared about body, soul, and spirit. He knew ill health and poverty, as well as persecution (p. 1054). Menno protested people's mistreatment in *A Pathetic Supplication to All Magistrates* (pp. 525–531), and he spoke against those who “tax and toll, grasp and grab, without any mercy or measure; they suck the very marrow from the bones of the poor” (p. 367). How prepared are we to approach government? How do we decide what is right to protest?

North American Christians benefit from structures that many in the Two-Thirds World say are unfair. To hold that we can't improve social, trade and political structures returns us to Hall's concern that we avoid our responsibilities out of convenience. To seek social justice is imperfect work, and there aren't easy answers to many issues. Yet, the Word is instructive and what we do shows our response (James 1:23–25). 

Discuss: What cautions or encouragements would you give to social activists? To quietists?

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2 GOOD NEWS FOR THE POOR

Social justice is part of our evangelical heritage

Tim Rogalsky

The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me to preach
good news to the poor. He has sent me
to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind, to
release the oppressed, to proclaim the
year of the Lord's favour.

(Luke 4:18–19)

The good we secure for ourselves is
precarious and uncertain—until it is
secured for all of us and incorporated
into our common life.

– Jane Addams

With this text of Luke 4:18–19, read from the book of Isaiah (61:1–2), in his hometown synagogue, Jesus inaugurates his public ministry. He defines this ministry with the Greek verb *euaggellizo* (to evangelize), translated by the NIV as *to preach good news*. How do we read these words today? Some say *poor*, *prisoners*, *blind*, and *oppressed* are spiritual conditions of the heart. They insist that Christians are primarily commissioned to win converts, to invite unbelievers into a saving, personal relationship with Jesus Christ. That is certainly included in the Great Commission, but ignores the significant social impact of the Good News.

Consider Luke's story, leading up to chapter 4. Mary's Magnificat (1:46–55) celebrates the reversal of fortunes signaled by the birth of the Messiah—"He has filled the hungry with good things, but has sent the rich away empty." Mary and Joseph (2:8–20) were of humble means, and Jesus was born with animals, his birth celebrated by poor, lowly shepherds. John the Baptist (3:1–14) explains that his "baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" has direct consequences for the poor: "Anyone who

has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same.” To the tax collectors, he said, “Don’t collect any more than you are required to.” And to the soldiers, “Don’t extort money.” Luke seems to have a preferential concern for the poor (none of these story elements appear in the other gospels) and clearly connects salvation and forgiveness with a renewed social conscience.

Why this focus on the poor? Think about the social context of Jesus’ Jewish listeners. Under the Roman system, the Jewish peasants were allowed to keep their land as long as they kept up with their taxes. To do so, they frequently had to borrow the money. These moneylenders charged their own interest. For many Jews, the debt snowballed beyond their ability to pay, forcing them to forfeit their land. Add to this the cheating tax collectors and extorting soldiers, and you have a poor, enslaved, oppressed people—longing for a Messiah to bring freedom, a fresh start, a new birth.

To this enslaved people, the “year of the Lord’s favour” (Luke 4:19) will have brought to mind the Year of Jubilee in Leviticus 25 (S. Ringe, *Jesus, Liberation, and the Biblical Jubilee*, Fortress, 1985). Every fifty years, the Jewish community was to enforce economic re-distribution. All debts were forgiven, all land was returned to its original owners, and all slaves were set free—Good News to the

poor, indeed! There is no biblical record that Jubilee was ever practiced, but it was not forgotten, and eventually became a messianic promise (compare Leviticus 25, Nehemiah 5, Psalm 146, Isaiah 61, Luke 4:18–19, and Luke 7:18–22).

Discuss: Ron Sider, president of Evangelicals for Social Action, writes, “The heretical neglect of the poor by many affluent Christians is a flat rejection of the Lord of the church” (*Good News and Good Works: A Theology for the Whole Gospel*, Baker, 1993). Compare this with Isaiah 58:1–9 and Amos 5:11–24. How do you respond? Does your church systematically neglect the poor?

This messianic Jubilee, proclaimed and fulfilled by Jesus (Luke 4:21), is nothing less than the kingdom of heaven. It begins with the spiritual conditions of the heart, in its offer of “forgiveness of sins” (1:77, 3:3), but goes well beyond that. *Forgiveness* (Greek *aphesis*) is acted out in the new social reality of Jubilee—*freedom* for the prisoners and the oppressed (*aphesis* again, in both Luke 4:18 and Leviticus 25:10). This is Good News for the (literally) poor and oppressed, precisely because it is the Good News of forgiveness of sins. Spiritual salvation directly implies

social justice. The kingdom of heaven has come in the form of a forgiven community, and that community—because it is the body of Christ—rejects all oppressive social practices.

Do comfortable, wealthy North American Christians really believe this holistic Good News? We have such a tendency to spiritualize and rationalize Jesus' teaching about the poor. We publicly read Matthew's Beatitudes (Matthew 5), but rarely hear Luke's (Luke 6). We pray "as we forgive those who sin against us" instead of, arguably, the more accurate translation, "as we forgive our (financial) debtors" (Luke 11:4).

We read, "You cannot serve both God and Money" (Luke 16:13) and agree that we need to give up our emotional dependency on possessions. Jesus says, "You still lack one thing. Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me" (Luke 18:22). His words are so indicting that we re-interpret them almost without thinking: "Jesus just means that we have to put Him first in our lives, instead of our money."

In a consumerist society, it's not surprising that we read Jesus' words in this way. The world has blinded us to the heavy sacrifice demanded by the twin gods of consumerism and capitalism. We consume cheap coffee and buy name-brand clothing—sacrificing sustainable



We avoid thinking about the cost of our comfort, yet the reality remains: We are the downfall of the poor.

wages for Two-Thirds-World labourers. We maintain our Western lifestyle, with its demand for oil and all things disposable—sacrificing a dying ecosystem. We pump time and money into our kids' hockey games and piano lessons—because we willingly sacrifice the time and money required to do anything about the plight of inner city addicts, prostitutes, and welfare moms. We deliberately avoid thinking about the cost of our comfort, yet the reality remains: We are the downfall of the poor.

We evangelicals sometimes resist this kind of thinking, because it seems to lead to a liberal "social gospel." If so, we must redeem social justice from the secularists, for there are evangelical options. Consider Charles Finney, the great evangelist of the 1830s and 40s, who insisted that revival is hindered when the church fails to embrace social reform. At a time when it was normal for white Christians

to own black slaves, Finney refused to allow slaveholders to participate in the Lord's Supper, and participated in civil disobedience—illegally stealing slaves and transporting them to Canada.

Discuss: How do capitalism and consumerism act as gods in our society? How does that influence the way we think and live?

Or consider Finney's disciple, Theodore Weld, who encouraged Christians to boycott slave-produced sugar and buy only *free sugar* (a similar concept to today's *free-trade coffee*). Weld also insisted that women should have equal rights to men—in voting, holding office, and more—and at his marriage, he publicly renounced ownership of his wife, rejecting the sexist laws of the time that gave a man exclusive rights to his wife's body and property.

In downtown Philadelphia, hundreds of buildings have been abandoned as the middle class has moved into the suburbs. The inner city poor frequently take shelter here. Several years ago, one group of homeless people, mostly single mothers and their children, moved into an abandoned church. When the church's owners got wind of this, they gave the group a week to leave, or be forcibly evicted by police. The media was all over the story, and

many Christians were shocked and indignant. Among them was a group of evangelical students at Eastern University (where Tony Campolo is a faculty member). Refusing to stop at indignation, these students went into action.


They plastered the campus with posters reading, "How can we worship a homeless man on Sunday, and evict him from church on Monday?" (a reference to Matthew 8:20 and 25:45). They rallied a large group of students, who moved into the church, en masse, with the street people. The police were quite willing to evict the homeless, but not a bunch of kids from the suburbs. Churches donated food, clothing, and toys; and students and street people lived and worshiped together communally. Today, these and others have become *the Simple Way*, an intentional Christian community in downtown Philadelphia, that continues to proclaim Good News to the poor.

Discuss: What would it look like for your church to proclaim Good News to the poor? Brainstorm together for ideas. For a start, see the sidebar.

To accept Jesus as Lord implies a regenerated social and economic relationship with the poor and oppressed (James 2). Of course, this is nothing less than what Anabaptists have always taught: Because the grace of

Christ is for forgiveness of sins, it also empowers us to serve Him and follow Him as disciples. In 1527, Leonhard Schiemer wrote, against turning the faith inward:

Just how would you demonstrate to others that you are true disciples and followers of Christ, *except* by feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked, sheltering the poor, comforting the sick and imprisoned, washing feet and showing love for one another (in C.A. Snyder, *Following in the Footsteps of Christ: The Anabaptist Tradition*, Orbis Books, 2004, p. 105, italics mine).

The News we proclaim is Good precisely because it is whole. Jesus sets us free to proclaim Jubilee to the spiritually *and* economically poor, the spiritually *and* politically oppressed. True followers of Jesus—true evangelists—neglect neither personal salvation nor social justice. 

Tim Rogalsky (Prairie Rose), BRS, PhD., is a math professor at Canadian Mennonite University, and volunteers at House of Hesed.

PLACES TO START:

- As a church, convert to free-trade coffee, and non-disposable cups.
- Proclaim (in Girl's Club, sermons, media) that your church wants unwanted babies, and supports pregnant teens and single moms.
- Found or support an AIDS hospice (see www.houseofhesed.ca).
- Get involved in prison ministry.
- Randomly choose a street person to take out for lunch once a week.
- Organize a weekly potluck at church or a local community centre, offering free food to the community.
- Simplify your lifestyle.
- Found an intentional community that shares possessions and welcomes the poor.

Notes:

3

JOINING SUNDAY TO MONDAY

Putting together our faith and work

Corinne Klassen and Edwin Friesen

The motive is everything. Let the man sanctify the Lord in his heart and he can thereafter do no common act.

– A. W. Tozer (*The Pursuit of God*)

It is impossible for a Christian to have a secular job. If you are following Jesus and you do what you do in his name, then it is no longer secular work; it's sacred. You are there; God is there. The difference is our awareness. This truth has significant implications for how churches function.

– Rob Bell (*Velvet Elvis*, 2005)

As Christians, our daily calling is to live a life that reflects the character and message of Christ among people with whom we live and work. That was the call given to the disciples before Jesus ascended to heaven (Acts 1:8) and to all who would follow later (John 17:17–18).

The Calling

Given our calling to reflect Christ, are there roles that provide greater opportunity or lesser opportunity to do so? Consider this list. Rank the roles from 1 (much opportunity to reflect the character of Christ) to 5 (little opportunity to reflect the character of Christ).

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Cross cultural missionary | <input type="checkbox"/> School janitor |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Plumber | <input type="checkbox"/> Teacher |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Stay-at-home parent | <input type="checkbox"/> Nurse |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Financial planner | <input type="checkbox"/> Writer |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Car salesperson | <input type="checkbox"/> Student |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Business entrepreneur | <input type="checkbox"/> Farmer |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Government ambassador | <input type="checkbox"/> Pastor |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Truck driver | <input type="checkbox"/> Engineer |

It's obvious that wherever life leads us, we have opportunity to be Christ-like. Does it make no real difference which life roles we pursue? Are there some roles to be avoided and others to be sought after? Do people have an additional calling from God (and the church) for a specific task for a specific time? Look at that list again.

Jesus called twelve men to follow him and start the New Testament church (Mark 6:7-12). They were handpicked by Christ. Paul saw himself as having a special calling to minister to the Gentiles (Acts 9:15, Romans 1:1). God called (pushed) Peter to step over the "Jews only" line and begin a ministry to Gentiles (Acts 10:9-22).

Though it seems that some in the early church had a special calling, thousands of other people were invited to follow Jesus for whom there is no further indication of vocational calling.

Consider Zachaeus, a dishonest tax collector (Luke 19:1-9). When he was called to follow, he was never told by Jesus to leave his job—a role generally regarded as being unethical. Zachaeus instinctively knew that following Jesus required a change in how he did business, but not necessarily a change in vocation.

Discuss: How can the Sunday service become a commissioning service for the week?

Guided by his newly sensitized conscience, he offered half of his possessions to the poor and to repay anyone he had overcharged. Was Zachaeus called to be a tax collector or was he called to be a Christian in his role as a tax collector?

Though we profess otherwise, Christians often practice a hierarchy of callings. We see some roles in life as more important to kingdom work than others. We affirm, bless, and support people who are convinced they are called to some form of Christian leadership, especially if their pay comes from the church.

Discuss: In what ways could your church help you make the secular sacred in your life role?

- An entrepreneur starting a business;
- A young person starting a first job;
- A senior looking at the first day of not reporting to work;
- An unemployed person worried about what will happen next;
- First time parents.

At the same time, we seem reluctant to affirm, bless, and support people who choose to be Christians in jobs where their pay does not come from the church. We designate

some life roles as spiritual and others as secular, but that is a fairly arbitrary—and not useful—exercise.

Too often we regard people who receive their income from the church as more spiritual than those who make their living in the public market. That makes no sense—it's exactly people in the public market who often have the greatest opportunity to demonstrate Christian living. Our life through the week validates or undermines the church's witness and our corporate worship on Sunday.

Gathered and Scattered

We fall into thinking about “church” as what we do on Sundays when we gather for worship, and view the rest of the week as personal. Actually, *we are* the church seven days a week, whether gathered or scattered. When Christians gather for worship, we are the church gathered. When we go about our daily work, we are the church scattered.

We gather for corporate worship to enable ourselves to be the church throughout the week, wherever our work scatters us. Every Sunday is Commissioning Day—a day set aside to nurture a spiritual perspective on the coming week.

Think of the church as a geometrical compass. The pivot reminds us of the church gathered. The drawing arm, moving in ever-larger circles, represents the church scattered. Anchored in gathering, the church is empowered to scatter. Though the two points are far apart, it's still one

compass; so too is the church. In rhythms of gathering and scattering, we are always the church, reflecting our head Christ.

Consider the potential impact. Hundreds of worshipping people gathered on Sunday morning and then scattered to a many locations 24 hours later—all bearing witness to the name of Jesus through their actions and words. Like a drop of water falling into the pool, marking its impact in ever-widening circles, the church's influence goes far beyond where it gathers. We can't influence the world from behind sterile walls. To influence people, we need to live and work among them.

Discuss: What opportunities do you have to make the secular sacred in your place of work?

Imagine the potential in the diversity of Christians. A hairdresser chatting with clients, a youth pastor mentoring youth around a basketball hoop, a salesperson closing a vehicle deal, and a housewife praying in the kitchen—all can be Christian witnesses in how they live. Their witness is shown by the kind of people they are—in thinking, acting and speaking.

As people assume their roles in homes, offices, factories, boardrooms, retail outlets, classrooms, or



As people assume their roles in homes, offices, factories, boardrooms, retail outlets, classrooms, or wherever their business or leisure may take them, they are the church in work clothes.

wherever their business or leisure may take them, they are the church in work clothes. Everywhere we go we are “mirrors that brightly reflect the glory of the Lord. And as the Spirit of the Lord works within us, we become more and more like him and reflect his glory even more” (2 Corinthians 3:18).

Making the Secular Sacred

Work is a blessing. To have the ability and opportunity to work is a gift. Through it we learn discipline, teamwork, and service. Though at times we may be reluctant students, work pushes us to learn, to grow, to hone underdeveloped abilities

into efficient skills. Life’s pressures squeeze us to develop and express Christ’s character (Galatians 5:22–23).

Discuss what challenges you face in practicing integrity in your life role.

- Work hard even though the boss will never know;
- Work with integrity even though the government inspector will never see it;
- Refuse to revise the balance sheet even though it would enhance the company image;
- Be committed to marital integrity even when traveling on the other side of the world.

How we go about our daily lives of relationships, work, and leisure either enhances or undermines God’s reputation in the community. People watch. From paying for a restaurant meal to distracting our two-year-old from a candy display, people observe our actions. We underestimate the power of our non-verbal witness. Being on display, it’s critical that we live with integrity.

The prophet Micah calls people to lives characterized by justice, mercy, and humility (Micah 6:6–8). Jesus encouraged his followers: “You are the salt of the earth... You are the light of the world... Don’t hide your light under

a basket. Instead put it on a stand and let it shine for all. In the same way let your good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father” (Matthew 5:13–16). Clearly our lifestyle is a significant part of our witness.

Many of us have a deeply engrained work ethic. In our desire to do good, we at times forget that we have physical and emotional limits. Though some have a greater capacity than others, all of us have limitations. Some Christians think that since they are serving God, God will enable them to serve even though they are misusing their bodies. Not likely. We all need our rhythms of work and relaxation. Even Moses had to be reminded that unless he paced himself and brought in help, he would wear out (Exodus 18:18).

Jesus too, though focused on his mission “to seek and save those...who are lost” (Luke 19:10), was flexible in his schedule. He had time to have a picnic with friends, to go fishing with disciples, to observe nature’s ways, to heal a stranger, to preach a sermon, or to chat with children. His days seemed to have rhythms of intense activity offset by periods of socializing and rest.

Supplemental Scriptures

Colossians 3:22–24, 4:3–4; 1 Thessalonians 4:11–12. *FM*

Discuss: How do you balance rhythms of work and relaxation in your life?

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Notes:

4 DOES POLITICS HAVE A PLACE IN THE CHRISTIAN LIFE?

Let me see a show of hands!

Michael Zwaagstra

One of the penalties for refusing to participate in politics is that you end up being governed by your inferiors.

– Plato

Politics, it seems to me, for years, or all too long, has been concerned with right or left instead of right or wrong.

– Richard Armour

The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.

– Edmund Burke

The question of whether or not Christians should be involved in political matters has been debated for centuries. Unsurprisingly, a variety of viewpoints have been advocated by different Christian leaders. Before addressing this issue, it is important to ensure that important terms, *politics* and *government*, are clearly defined.

Politics comes from the Greek word *polis* (meaning city-state). Modern-day dictionaries define politics as “the science and art of government.” In this chapter, government refers to human rule or authority over a specific geographic territory. Thus, political involvement would mean seeking to influence, by a variety of methods, the decisions made by a government.

Many different forms of governments have existed over the centuries. Along with other Western nations, the Canadian government is known as a democracy—meaning that citizens have a direct say in choosing their representatives. As a result, Canadian Christians are faced

with a special challenge since political involvement is encouraged more than it is in non-democratic countries.

There are three main types of political involvement that will be examined in this chapter. The first of these, unique to democratic systems, is voting. The second, lobbying (applying political pressure in an attempt to influence governmental decisions), is closely related to the first. Finally, some Christians have chosen to join political parties and even exercise governmental authority by holding political office. It is important to consider whether or not it is permissible for Christians to become involved in any of these ways.

Government According to the Bible

The Bible has a number of things to say about government that are important to consider.

- Government is ordained by God (Romans 13:1; John 19:11).
- Obedience to the government is commanded by God (Romans 13:1–7).
- Since we live in a sinful fallen world (Romans 3:23; 8:19–22) and sin promotes lawlessness (1 John 3:4), governments are needed to provide temporal protection and justice to all citizens (Romans 13:3–6).
- While Christians are commanded to obey the

government, we are required to have a higher allegiance to the kingdom of God. In circumstances where the laws of the state and the laws of God conflict, God’s laws must supersede those of the state (Acts 5:29).

The Dilemma Presented

While Christians live in the world, we are always mindful of the fact that we are not to “love the world or the things in the world” (1 John 2:15). Since governments are necessarily man-made and temporal, we must be wary of becoming too entangled in worldly affairs and losing sight of the kingdom of God (2 Corinthians 6:15–17). It is important for Christians to be ever mindful of our heavenly focus and to not allow earthly success to become our primary objective. “For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his life?” (Matthew 16:26).

Discuss: Why have some Christians expressed concerns about becoming involved in politics?

For these and other reasons, some prominent writers in the Anabaptist tradition have argued for political non-involvement as the Christian ideal. Guy Hershberger’s book, *War, Peace and Nonresistance*, and Dr. Archie Penner’s

booklet, *A Christian Conscience and Politics*, both argue that it is inconsistent for Anabaptist Christians to seek higher level political office due to the inherent problems in consistently upholding the non-resistance ideal. Penner goes so far as to state that “political action stands outside Anabaptist, New Testament nonresistance.”

The challenge raised by these and other writers is significant and needs to be addressed. As Christians in the Anabaptist tradition, we place great emphasis on the fact that we are disciples of Jesus and seek to emulate his lifestyle. If political involvement involves compromising our witness, it should be abandoned.

The Case for Political Involvement

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, political involvement is defined as attempting to influence decisions made by the government through one of the following means: Voting, lobbying, and seeking/holding political office. It is significant to note that a strong Biblical and historical case can be made for allowing, and even encouraging, Christian involvement in political affairs.

Discuss: What are some of the different forms of political involvement? Are they substantially different from each other?

Jesus described his followers as the salt and light of the earth (Matthew 5:13-16). By choosing to withdraw entirely from political affairs, we remove our potential Christian witness from that area as well.

There are numerous godly men and women in the Bible who held high positions within their respective governments. Joseph was appointed to be second in command to the Pharaoh of Egypt and was used by God to help save his family, as well as citizens of other nations, from the famine (Genesis 45:5). Daniel served in high positions in the courts of Nebuchadnezzar the Babylonian and Darius the Mede. Largely through Daniel’s godly witness, Nebuchadnezzar eventually came to faith in the true and living God (Daniel 4).

Discuss: How should Christians deal with other Christians who have different perspectives on the appropriateness of political involvement?

Esther, a Jew living in Persia, was chosen to be queen. Through her actions, the Jews were saved from destruction under the king’s edict. Mordecai, her cousin, poignantly asked her, “And who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this” (Esther 4:14).

It is clear that it was God’s divine will for these men

and women to hold these positions within their respective governments. To claim that God would never again call one of his followers to assume an influential role within a government seems presumptuous and ignores the fact that He has already done so many times in the past.

In the New Testament, Paul had no problem making use of his Roman citizenship in order to improve his circumstances and acquire a better hearing for the gospel (Acts 22:25–29; 25:10–12). One detects in Paul a willingness to use the political system when it was advantageous to do so.

Christians of different persuasions should show respect for their brothers in the faith who honestly differ on the matter of political involvement.



In history, there are numerous instances where Christians, both Anabaptists and non-Anabaptists, exercised political influence in a positive manner. In 1552, Menno Simons wrote *A Pathetic Supplication to All Magistrates* in which he asked the political leaders for

religious tolerance. This certainly can be considered to be a moderate form of lobbying. In addition, Mennonites have met with—lobbied—political leaders in order to avoid military service.

Discuss: Where could Anabaptists find themselves in conflict within political situations?

One also has to consider the many Protestant social reform movements. The abolition of slavery in Britain, and later in other countries, largely came about as a result of Christians who strenuously denounced the practice as evil and exercised their political influence accordingly. Similarly, the temperance and prohibition movements were also led by committed Christians and made an impact in both the United States and Canada.

In addition, political analysts believe that in the 2004 American presidential election, evangelical Christians provided the necessary votes to ensure the re-election of George W. Bush. (For many of these voters, President Bush's pro-life stance on abortion and support for the traditional definition of marriage outweighed concerns about his decision to initiate the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.)

As shown by the other chapters in this book, Anabaptist Christians are deeply concerned about social

justice issues. In a modern democratic state, it is almost impossible to truly engage issues such as poverty, racism, ecology, and war without being willing to countenance some form of political involvement.

Discuss: One political candidate favours war and another favours abortion. Whom do you vote for? (Is not voting appropriate?)


Paul makes it clear that Christians are to honour and respect their governments as well as to pay their taxes (Romans 13:7). Since democratic governments can only exist if a sufficient number of citizens exercise their right to vote, one can argue that Christians are not respecting their government if they refuse to exercise this right. While this obviously would not be an issue in a non-democratic state (such as Rome), it clearly is an issue in this country.

The official EMC position on involvement in political affairs has changed significantly over the years. While the 1960 EMC Constitution contained a complete ban on church members becoming involved in political affairs, the 1973 Constitution urged members to exercise “great discretion” in their involvement. The most recent edition of the Constitution (1994) urges members to be sensitive to the moral problems involved in political action.

Discuss: The author says that living in a democracy increases our responsibility to be involved in the political system.

Conclusion

While those who advocate political non-involvement make some valid points that are well-worth considering, it seems unwise to go so far as to declare that Christians should have no involvement in political affairs whatsoever. On the other hand, some appropriate cautions should also be considered:

- In the spirit of Romans 14, Christians of different persuasions should show respect for their brothers in the faith who honestly differ on the matter of political involvement.
- Political involvement must not become our primary focus as Christians. Jesus has told us to make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:18-20) and this is our overriding goal.
- Earthly governments are not intended to be a substitute for the kingdom of God. Jesus made it clear that his kingdom was not of this world (John 18:36). 

Discuss: Is democracy a biblical idea?

Michael Zwaagstra (Steinbach EFC), B.Ed., PBCE, and M.Ed., has been active in federal and provincial election campaigns, and is an EMC representative within the MCC Canada delegate body.

Notes:

5

RACIAL PREJUDICE

But some of my best friends are Native!

Doris Penner and Stella Neff

If the Great Spirit is dead, the Indian knows who killed him. It was the missionary...the church is so discredited in native society that quite possibly its smartest move on the long run would be to cease all its activities on behalf of the native peoples.

– Harold Cardinal (*The Unjust Society*, 1969)

Compassion is sometimes the fatal capacity for feeling what it is like to live inside somebody else's skin. It is the knowledge that there can never really be any peace and joy for me until there is peace and joy finally for you too.

– Frederick Buechner

Harold Cardinal's words are chilling indeed. While most Canadians would agree that missionaries have had plenty of positive influence in the almost 500 years of association with aboriginals in this land, it does appear the Christian Church had an opportunity and in many ways blew it.

How could this happen? Were not most of the non-Indian missionaries through the years well-intentioned, seeking to “save the souls” of Natives and improve their lives with education and medicine?

While the answer is yes, it doesn't change the fact that from the beginning, the Church approached the Natives with an attitude of superiority. The missionary did not come in the spirit of brotherhood; he came to bring the Natives the gospel—which, unfortunately, was the gospel “according to the white man”—with the underlying intent of “taming the savage” (*The Whiteman's Gospel*, Craig Stephen Smith, *Indian Life*, 1998).

History of Racism in Canada

The belief in the superiority of one race when compared to another is racism—and it has been present in aboriginal-white relations since Europeans first stepped onto Canadian shores. The Indian has never been considered equal to the white population. During the years of settlement, it was the “ignorant” Indian against the “sophisticated” white. As the white European population became dominant, the Indian had increasingly less power and eventually became a “problem.”

While in the past three decades it has been politically incorrect to be openly racist, biases and bigotry abound. Despite the indignant protests of Canadians that they have no prejudice against aboriginals, true feelings quickly surface when there is any sort of confrontation involving Natives. And myths refuse to die: For example, Indians are irresponsible, are prone to alcoholism, lack initiative.

Discuss: To what extent do we get defensive when it's suggested that we are racist?

Tim Rees in his essay on *Native People and Racism* (*Currents* Vol. 4, No. 2) suggests there are several responses of a dominant group towards a minority group. The first is

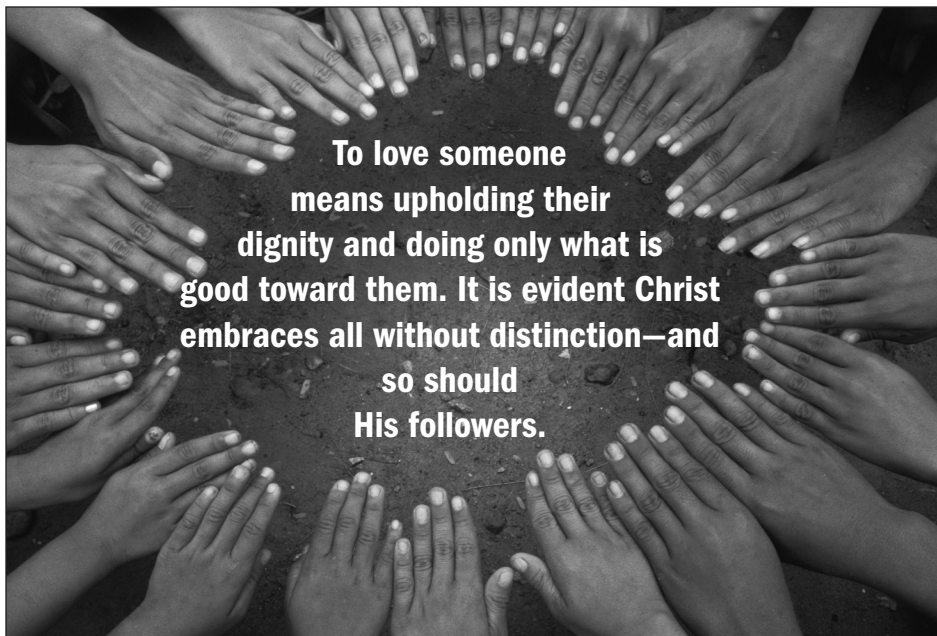
extermination—a most terrible solution to say the least. *Expulsion* removes the minority to another location, while *segregation* separates the minority from the dominant group. *Assimilation* refers to two distinctly different groups blending into one, unifying customs and worldview.

Over the past four centuries, Natives have suffered at various times from all four treatments, most recently segregation (isolating Natives on reserves) and assimilation. While the last response might seem to be the most humane, it has not been an amalgamation of two cultures, but rather an attempt to force Natives to adopt the dominant white values. The residential schools, of course, were an attempt by the government in league with the Church to assimilate aboriginal children by plucking them from their home communities and placing them in institutions, often devoid of love and caring, in order to

Discuss Harold Cardinal's statement. Why has there not been more emphasis placed on the positive influence of the Church?

teach them “white” values and religion.

The message aboriginals were given was “your culture and language is not worth preserving. Learn the white man's customs and language and live.” This is racism.



Results of Racism

This attitude of superiority by white society has resulted over time in the loss of a positive self-image and pride in Natives' own culture, which in turn has resulted in a high incidence of alcohol and drug use, high unemployment,

high poverty rates and other adverse socio-economic problems.

The risk factors associated with suicide—which is disproportionately high among aboriginals—have been identified as psycho-biological problems such as unresolved grief, situational factors including disruptions of family life (enforced attendance at residential schools), and culture stress, which refers to loss of confidence in ways of life once taught within the culture. This comes about when the language, social institutions, beliefs and ethical rules that bind a people together are subject to scorn, discrimination or total disregard.

Racism is a Sin

We would expect the church to take a higher road. Love for one's fellow human beings of whatever culture or colour is woven into the very fabric of scripture from beginning to end. Jesus' "new commandment" to His disciples was that they "love one another" as He had loved them (John 13:34). No one would disagree that to love someone means upholding their dignity and doing only

what is good toward them. It is evident Christ embraces all without distinction—and so should His followers.

Discuss: How do we express the gospel of Christ's love without judging another culture based on our own? In what way has the Church's history hindered this?

But the Bible addresses racism even more explicitly—and when one has reviewed the biblical principles that speak to it, there is no doubt that racism is a sin.

First, God is the creator of the world and everything in it, and “his purpose in all this was that the nations should seek after God” (Acts 17:24, 26–27). Any attempt to identify certain people or groups as lesser members of humankind is a blasphemous affront to the Creator.

Secondly, the dignity of all human beings is given by God—it has nothing to do with race or colour (Genesis 1:26–27; 9:6).

Essentially, racism is pride—which is security placed in self rather than God. Pride is everywhere condemned in Scripture—it is what caused Satan to fall from heaven and it must be regarded as idolatry.

Fourthly, God sent Jesus Christ to be the Saviour of all humankind, in whatever nation or culture they may be

found (1 Timothy 2:3–6). Again and again in Revelation we read that God in Jesus has completed His work of salvation for all people, languages and nations (Revelation 5:8–9; 7:9–10; 13:7; 15:4; 22:2).

By His death, Jesus has removed all barriers that stand between human beings—making peace and reconciliation possible. Paul writes, “He is our peace, who has made us both one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility” (Ephesians 2:13–16). Racism in the church cripples all efforts to “maintain the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:3)

Discuss: What challenges does the Church face in working with/worshipping with Natives?

Relationships—White and Native Christians Today

Have the “dividing walls of hostility” been broken down between white Christians and aboriginals since Cardinal penned his observations in 1969? Are they worshipping together in Churches across Canada in unity and with one spirit? The answer would, too often, have to be *no*. While there are places where aboriginal Christians mingle with white Christians, this is not common. For the past three decades, Natives have not come to know the Lord in great numbers. How can this be?

Part of the answer is that racism is still present—even within

the Church. Many Native people are bitter against the Church for the role it played in the residential school system, which was built on a racist philosophy. And although not all church denominations were party to the system, the fact remains it was the Christian Church which acted against everything the Bible teaches about love, acceptance and peace to inflict on aboriginals pain of the worst kind. Add to that the hundreds of years of racism practised by whites—including Christians—against aboriginals in our country. Is it any wonder many Indians don't trust Christians or their God?

Discuss: How does the Bible interpret and respond to racism?

Healing Relationships


What the Christian Church has not done to heal relationships also points out what they should do. Christians should begin by repenting of the sin of racism—to repent of times they have failed to recognize racism, turned a blind eye or not taken action. There must be a commitment to personal holiness with the prayer of the Psalmist, “Search me, O God, and know my heart. . . try me and know my thoughts and see if there is any offensive way in me” (Psalm 139:23–24).

Genuine repentance will result in working against

racism in the church and in society. This means openly disagreeing with racist jokes and attitudes and guarding the words we use lest they be perceived as hurtful and degrading. It means upholding the dignity of all human beings, irrespective of racial background, and teaching our children to respect all people by giving them opportunities to meet those of other races.

Seek to build bridges by learning about other cultures—read about it, talk to other people and try to understand. Learn about the problems different ethnic groups face in Canadian society without being judgmental. Build friendships with people of other cultures with no underlying motives of pushing your own agenda. Simply accept them for who they are, and be open to learning from them.

Help our churches become a place where people of all races are actively welcomed and given opportunity to participate in leadership. Evaluate our styles of worship to ensure we are accepting of other cultures.

By being sensitive to other cultures and encouraging the church to make holiness and humility their goal, we are helping the church to realize the vision found in the Gospels where God's people of all races and colours are one in Christ with no barriers separating us. 

Discuss: What are other ways churches will be effective in becoming multi-racial?

Doris Penner (Prairie Rose), BRS, BA, and M.Sc., has taught school in First Nations communities.

Stella Neff, BA, B.Ed., has served within Manitoba communities as a language arts consultant, school teacher, a principal, and a cross-cultural and diversity awareness trainer. She now serves, in part, as a pastor's wife in her home community of Grand Rapids, Man. She is the descendent of generations of Cree Christians.

Notes:

6

PRO-LIFE? WHAT'S THE ALTERNATIVE?

A radical alternative without easy answers *Ruth Thiessen and Audrey Guenther*

Abortion is advocated only by persons who have themselves been born.

– Ronald Reagan

I think computer viruses should count as life. I think it says something about human nature that the only form of life we have created so far is purely destructive. We've created life in our own image.

– Stephen Hawking

The Holy See insistently proclaims that the first and most fundamental of all human rights is the right to life, and that when this right is denied all other rights are threatened.

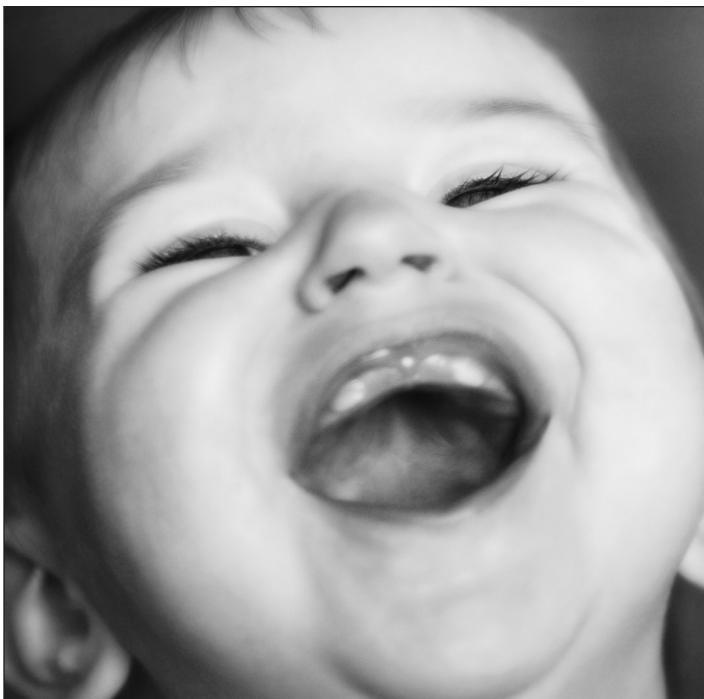
– Pope John Paul II, May 25, 2000

Our society seems to increasingly value self, health, and technology. Abortions are on the rise. Euthanasia, not an option that many years ago, is gaining acceptance. Technology allows us to assist in the creation of babies in a Petri dish and extend life for the aged and the terminally ill.

Terminal or debilitating illnesses might some day be treatable through stem cell research. With all these realities we face more ethical dilemmas. What values will we embrace? How will we stand against practices that devalue human life?

To find answers to some of these troubling situations, we begin by acknowledging that God is the creator of all life (Genesis 1). After creating the physical world, He created the animal kingdom and then He created humankind. “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them” (Genesis 1:27). Humankind was unique in that we could have a relationship with our Creator. We were given free will.

Equally amazing is our physical design. At the moment of conception, the 23 chromosomes and approximately



“I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made.”

50,000 genes from each parent combine to determine all our physical characteristics—sex; facial features; body type; colour of hair, eyes and skin. Even our intelligence and personality were determined within our genetic code. At the one cell stage, we were already essentially and uniquely the person God designed us to be. Knowing this, shouldn't we value all human life?

Discuss: At what point do people begin to play God?

We are not the only society that has grappled with pro-life and pro-choice issues. Societies throughout history practiced abortion and infanticide. But the Israelites, God's chosen race, had respect for God's involvement in their lives from the time of conception. Psalm 139:13–16 says, “For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made...your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.”

Jesus Valued All People

At the time of Christ, abortion and infanticide were commonly practiced among the Romans. Although Jesus never directly addressed these practices, He demonstrated

how much He valued life in how He treated people. He healed people who were lame, blind, had leprosy, and many more. He made no distinction between people who were disabled, sick, aged, healthy or productive. He valued them all.

The early church, having witnessed Jesus' love for all humanity took a strong pro-life position, including opposing abortions.

Discuss: How would medical dilemmas be less complicated if we recognized God as the Creator of all human life from conception to life's natural end?

Do we have the same conviction today? Or do we sometimes try to justify abortion on the basis that having the baby will be too hard for the teen parents, too economically stressful, and too destructive to many future opportunities? However, to oppose abortions means that we as a church need to love, care and find practical ways to help those facing an unplanned pregnancy.

Abortion

Few of us could have envisioned that the Roe vs. Wade court case in 1973 would have such dramatic effects on the sanctity of life. At first the concern focused on a few women

who were so desperate to end their pregnancies that they were willing to risk back alley abortions. By 2005, globally there were 26 million unborn babies aborted yearly.

When first legalized, there were stringent regulations as to when an abortion could be allowed; today the mere inconvenience of having the baby will suffice.

In the 1970's abortions were restricted to the first trimester. Today, a woman can choose one up till the time of the baby's birth. From these liberties, it has progressed to offering RU-486, a pill that can be taken in the earliest stage of a suspected pregnancy. This allows a woman to dispose of the fetus in the privacy of her own home.

Although the methods vary depending on a woman's stage of pregnancy, abortion results in the death of a precious unborn baby. Many women and men who have made this choice regret their decision, and we need to embrace them in their healing journey.

Discuss: The reasons and requirements for an abortion have become increasingly lenient. What can the church do to respond to this?

Another consequence of legalizing abortion is that there are fewer babies available for adoption. To compensate, reproductive technologies have gained importance.

Today, in vitro fertilization is used to provide hope to many childless couples.

When this method was first introduced, usually three eggs were retrieved, fertilized, and implanted. Because of the expense and time factor involved in this procedure, medications were developed to enable doctors to harvest twelve eggs and fertilize them all, usually implant three embryos and freeze the rest. Some might be used for subsequent pregnancies, but others are disposed of or used for research. Christian couples using in vitro fertilization may wish to ask for only three eggs to be retrieved, fertilized and implanted, or give clear instructions about their wishes for additional embryos. If we acknowledge that God is the creator of each life, even those which are conceived in a Petri dish, shouldn't we be vigilant in how each is treated?

Stem Cell Research

Some of the surplus frozen embryos are used in stem cell research. At one week old, their undifferentiated cells and prolific quality, were believed to be the best source for developing treatments for diabetes, multiple sclerosis, leukemia, and immune disorders. But do we have the right to kill these week-old unborn babies so that we can enjoy better health? The answer should be no. It is in fact unnecessary since new scientific research credits

“the abilities of adult stem cells (which are plentiful) with as much or more promise of treating disease as ES cells have” (*Human Dignity in the Biotech Century*, eds. Charles W. Colson and Nigel M de S. Cameron, 2004, p. 46).

Amniocentesis

Amniocentesis is just another example of good medical practices that can be used for selfish and destructive causes. It was first used to determine if an unborn child had a disease that could be corrected in the womb, if treatment would be required right after delivery, and to determine the age of the fetus. Today it is often used to determine abnormalities or used for sex selection—with the less-than-perfect child possibly aborted.

Peter Singer, professor at Princeton University, took it a step further, saying “that since children less than a month old have no human consciousness, parents of a severely disabled infant should be allowed to euthanize the infant to end its suffering” (*Practical Ethics*, Cambridge University Press, 1979). Unfortunately, even a growing number of Christians seem to favour infanticide.

Euthanasia

Having devalued life at the beginning we now face end of life ethical issues are proving to be equally contentious. For those who worship health or wholeness euthanasia

has become a viable option. Euthanasia implies a painless, easy death. So why suffer needlessly? Why require families to endure the journey with you until natural death occurs?

Advocates of euthanasia would have little reservation with some forms of physician-assisted suicide. They might include sedating terminally ill competent patients to the point of unconsciousness and then allowing them to die of their disease, starvation or dehydration. Another method is simply withholding life-sustaining treatment if a patient so desires, or increasing pain medication to hasten death rather than administering lower dosages just to relieve suffering.

Discuss: In dealing with technologies to significantly extend life or prolong death, there seem to be no easy answers. How do we respond to such a statement?

Al Truesdale cautions us, “Euthanasia steps over a line that should never be crossed. It is perhaps the ultimate expression of human arrogance” (*God in the Laboratory*, Beacon Hill, 2000, p. 7). But where is this line? Who determines it? Although every family or individual will face this situation in their own unique way, some questions might be asked. What is the wish of the dying person? Are we asking for life-sustaining measures because we

cannot face the death of our loved one or because we have unresolved issues? Are we willing to journey unselfishly with our terminally ill family member? Or do we convey a message that this is too sacrificial, thereby encouraging them to seek ways to hasten their death?

Modern technology allows us to extend life or prolong death. Modern medicine allows us to terminate life prematurely. To choose our appointed time does not honour God. To fear death and use every available technology for extended periods of time may show a lack of trust in Him. He has promised to walk with us through life, including the valley of death. He is faithful and will not give us more than we can handle.

To God all human life is sacred. The circumstances of conception, the wholeness of one’s body, the degree of suffering, or the loss of ability to accomplish life’s tasks are not reasons to devalue life.

Knowing the sinful state of humankind, who of us can rightly determine the criteria for life and death? When we acknowledge God as the giver of all life and trust God with the appropriate time of a person’s departure, the ethical dilemmas become less complex. ~~For~~

Role play how a Christian responds to a person who has had an abortion.

Ruth Thiessen (Steinbach EFC), BRS, is a past director of Grace Haven, a pregnancy counseling centre in Steinbach, Man.

Audrey Guenther (Steinbach EFC), BA, is a past assistant director of Grace Haven, a pregnancy counseling centre in Steinbach, Man.

Notes:

7 ISN'T WAR A FOUR-LETTER WORD?

The moral issue our churches rarely talk about

Ron Penner

One is left with the horrible feeling now that war settles nothing; that to win a war is as disastrous as to lose one.

– Agatha Christie

What difference does it make to the dead, the orphans and the homeless, whether the mad destruction is wrought under the name of totalitarianism or the holy name of liberty or democracy?

– Mahatma Gandhi

Wars teach us not to love our enemies, but to hate our allies.

– W. L. George

Some Mennonite churches are hesitant to take a strong anti-war position. What was once a strong identifying component of our faith has become an issue that raises many questions.

Why preach against war when many other Christians consider it an activity of honour and Christian faithfulness? How will evil be overcome if good people don't resist evildoers? What about Old Testament war stories?

Peacemakers do not have all the answers for all the world's problems nor a good answer on how to overcome every evil. At times we may feel embarrassed or cowardly for not being willing to defend our freedoms. However, as we study scripture and consider Jesus' life and teaching, we conclude that war is sin. It is always wrong and clearly denies the nature of God as embodied in Jesus Christ and the church.

Discuss: Some Mennonite churches shy away from teaching against war. Why is this?

The Old Testament Vision

War is a reality in parts of the Old Testament. Many of these wars, it appears, were implicitly or explicitly commanded by God to his chosen people, Israel. Stories of heroic conquests by Gideon, Samson, Joshua, and David are embedded in readers' minds through exciting Sunday school lessons.

Discuss: How does progressive revelation influence how we interpret Scripture?

As revelation progresses, we see another development. Old Testament prophets predict a new day is coming. A vision develops that speaks of God's people being taught his ways and "nations beating swords into ploughshares and spears into pruning hooks." The sword will not be used; nations will not "train for war anymore" (Isaiah 2:1–5, Micah 4:1–5). Furthermore, Isaiah promises a Saviour to be born who will be called Emmanuel (God with us), Prince of Peace. His kingdom will be a government of "peace without end" (Isaiah 9:2–7).

Jeremiah predicts that the old covenant will be replaced by a new covenant instituted by Jesus Christ (Jeremiah 31:31–34). This prophetic announcement of a new day is a fuller revelation of God's plan and becomes the basis of

a new ethic (Matthew 5:17, Hebrews 1:1–3, Luke 4:18–19).

Even as God's plan involved Israel in the Old Testament, the responsibility now shifts to the body of Christ, the new Israel, in the New Testament. As such, it adopted the spirit of Christ in all its activities, including its non-resistance to violence and a commitment to peace.

Our Christianity

Following Jesus has been the hallmark of the Anabaptist movement since its inception in the early 16th century. Christians are disciples of Christ who seek to emulate his attitudes, teachings, and example in all of life, including times of war.

Discuss: How should a non-resistant Christian approach the story of David and Goliath?

Jesus Christ came in to the world to save his enemies by giving his life as an act of love (Romans 5:8). This was God's way of extending salvation and grace to a world estranged from him. Earlier we were "far away" from God, but were brought near "through the blood of Christ." Thereby he became our peace, and we are called to follow in his steps (Ephesians 2:13–14, Galatians 5:22, Philippians 2:6–11).

Not only was Christ representing God's gift of peace, his

teachings explicitly forbade using force or violence in our relationships with others, including enemies (Matthew 5:43–48).



War is the antithesis of all the gospel stands for. War involves hate, not love; retaliation rather than reconciliation; it is search and destroy instead of to seek and save.

The Sermon on the Mount cannot be interpreted in any other way than that the followers of Jesus are peacemakers. We are commanded to “turn the other cheek” when struck (Matthew 5:39) and submit to those who seek to exploit us. As his followers we are to “love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us” (Matthew 5:44). Paul, too, reminds us that God will take care of evildoers and we are to live at peace with all people (Romans 12:17–21).

Discipleship requires Christians to follow Christ’s example of love and forgiveness since he is the fullest revelation of God’s will. Our life must harmonize with

his. We must emphasize that these standards apply at all times. Since no one ever has dared to picture Jesus with a gun in his hand, neither should his followers consider such a role (John Drescher, *Why Christians Shouldn’t Carry Swords*, *Christianity Today*, November 7, 1980).

Discuss: War is the opposite of what Jesus stood for and taught. How do you respond to that statement?

The Kingdom of God

Jesus inaugurated a new kingdom upon his coming (Matthew 4:23). Sincerely we pray the Lord’s Prayer, “Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven”(Matthew 6:10), thereby committing ourselves to a standard of living that transcends the kingdom of this world and offers a foretaste of heaven (Myron Augburger, *The PeaceMaker*, Abingdon, 1987). Additionally, Paul wrote that this kingdom is one of “righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Romans 14:17), not conflict and extension of national boundaries.

Discuss: How should being an international church influence our decisions as Christians?

Central to this kingdom is his body, the church. The church is global; its members belong to each other regardless of nationality, country or political system. When one nation, including its Christians, takes up arms against another nation, the state is king, not Christ.

Discuss: “As non-resistant Christians, we cannot support war, whether as officers, soldiers, combatants or non-combatants, or direct financial contributors” (Article 9, EMC Statement of Faith).
What do you think of this statement?

For Christians of one country to kill those of another is incongruous with our mandate to love and cherish and give ourselves to others in the church. The principle of the unity of the body cannot be set aside during wartime. Christ, not Caesar, is the head of that worldwide family and each part is equally loved and treasured by him (Matthew 6:33, Mark 1:15, John 18:36–37).

If North American Christians would withdraw their support of the military and declare that Jesus is Lord of their lives, the current respectability for war would be denied. War would be exposed as the most evil, sinful, violent transgression against all that Jesus lived and preached (John 14:27; Ephesians 2:14, 18; 2 Corinthians 5:17, 1 Corinthians 12:12–26).

The Gospel

Redeeming love is at the heart of the gospel. God loves the whole world (John 3:16). That is the good news! All people are invited by God to experience love, joy, peace, and eternal life. Christians are called to preach this good news “to every creature” (Mark 16:15). God is not willing that “any should perish but all should come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9). The gospel is global, a universal message, regardless of nation, creed or race.

War is the antithesis of all the gospel stands for. War involves “hate, not love; retaliation rather than reconciliation; it is search and destroy instead of to seek and save” (John Drescher, and see Luke 19:10). War is designed to give death instead of life and as such is an absolute denial of the example, teaching and invitation of Christ to come to a relationship with God (John Drescher).

Each person on the battlefield has an eternal soul. A Christian who kills a believer, kills someone for whom each of us ought to lay down our life. If the person killed is not a Christian, a person who does not believe is sent into eternity without experiencing the forgiveness of Christ that Christians are to proclaim (John 15:12–14, 3:36, 3:18).

Present-Day Application

For centuries Anabaptists have maintained steadfastly that the principles of peace as proposed by Christ were clear and unequivocal. In our minds, this interpretation of Scripture in general, and the Sermon on the Mount specifically, was non-negotiable. Many Christians today, however, wonder whether these are realistic in the face of evil throughout the world. How would ruthless dictators like Hitler or Hussein be held in check without military might? What are the answers to suicide bombers as seen in Palestine today? Can terrorists, such as those responsible for the World Trade Center disaster, be contained or dealt with apart from a strong military response?

Should the United Nations send troops into Sudan to protect the minorities that are being slaughtered there? Or should Canada be encouraged to have a peacekeeping role in tension spots internationally? The message of peace as we confess it is hard to reconcile with perceived needs for protecting the freedoms many of us enjoy. Our answers to these questions must be faithful to the clear call of Christ.¹⁷

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We believe in the life of peace. We are called to walk in the steps of the Lamb of God, the Prince of Peace. Everything about his life, his teachings and his redemptive death on the cross, summons us to a life of nonviolence.

As nonresistant Christians, we cannot support war, whether as officers, soldiers, combatants or noncombatants, or direct financial contributors.

Instead of taking up arms, we should do whatever we can to lessen human distress and suffering, even at the risk of our own lives. In all circumstances, we should be peacemakers and ministers of reconciliation (Isaiah 53:3–9; Matthew 5–7; 28:18–20; John 18:36; Romans 12–13; Philippians 2:3–4; Colossians 2:14–15; Hebrews 1:1–2; 2:14; 1 Peter 2:9, 20–23).

EMC Statement of Faith, 1994

Notes:

8

THE ARMS RACE AND THE SEARCH FOR SECURITY

Are we shooting ourselves in the foot?

Ernie Regehr

Ours is a world of nuclear giants and ethical infants. If we continue to develop our technology without wisdom or prudence, our servant may prove to be our executioner.

— Omar Bradley

I believe everybody in the world should have guns. Citizens should have bazookas and rocket launchers too. I believe that all citizens should have their weapons of choice. However, I also believe that only I should have the ammunition. Because frankly, I wouldn't trust the rest of the goobers with anything more dangerous than string.

— Scott Adams

At the mid-point of the first decade of the twenty-first century, 32 wars are being fought worldwide on the territories of 26 countries. Some countries, like Indonesia and the Philippines, are hosts to more than one war. Many wars, as in Sudan and India (Kashmir), are decades old. Others, like the war in Iraq or the secessionist conflict in the Cabinda region of Angola, are relatively new.

The cumulative death toll from these wars is in the millions, and each year tens of thousands more people die in combat, and hundreds of thousands die as the consequence of the chaos of war. These are not conventional wars between highly mechanized armies with professional soldiers doing the fighting. Instead they are largely conditions of progressive social disintegration accompanied by escalating political violence in localized regions or communities where untrained civilians are drawn in as combatants.

Discuss: How many wars are we conscious of going on currently? What does this say about us?

The daily realities of people in and near the world's killing fields seem far removed from the Psalmist's promise that the Lord "will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge;...you will not fear the terror of the night, nor the arrow that flies by day" (opening verses of Psalm 91).

Mired in relentless peril, is it so surprising that people in the midst of ongoing political and social instability would be driven to search for protection and security in other places? Indeed, the feeling of vulnerability and the urge to overcome it are not confined to the weak.

Since September 11, 2001, the world's most powerful nation has been preoccupied with the search for security. The declared "War on Terror" has involved a vast array of new legislative and law enforcement measures, and in Afghanistan and Iraq it soon moved from the metaphorical to the literal.

Military Spending Has More Than One Cost

The search for security through the barrel of a gun is as old as the guns themselves, but the hope for safety through military might has now reached new and

dangerous heights. The post-Cold War decline in military spending is over, led by huge increases in spending on US military forces and wars. At \$550 billion (Canadian) per year, US military spending is now almost half of the world's total—more than that spent by Russia, China and another 30 of the world's most powerful states (*SIPRI Yearbook 2005: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security*, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Oxford University Press, 2005).

Discuss: What is your response to the statement that "churches have an important contribution to emphasizing the centrality of disarmament to security"?

The danger derives not only from the wars that are fueled by such massive mobilization of military material and personnel, but also from the diversion of scarce resources from the effort to meet basic human needs. As President Eisenhower famously said: "Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired, signifies in the final sense a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed" (Dwight Eisenhower, "The Chance for Peace," Speech of April 16, 1953, <http://www.quotedb.com/speeches/chance-for-peace>).

A New Interest in Nuclear Weapons

The idea that we can find safety in the capacity to destroy finds its most extravagant expression in the renewed interest in nuclear weapons. For 60 years now, the world has lived in the presence of weapons quite literally capable of human annihilation, but with the end of the Cold War significant progress was made in reducing those arsenals and moving closer to the declared objective of eliminating all nuclear weapons.

But in 2002 the United States undertook a new *Nuclear Policy Review* and later issued a new *National Security Strategy* document, both of which articulated a clear commitment to modernizing the US nuclear arsenal and to new nuclear use doctrines. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), of which Canada is a founding member, also retains a formal commitment to nuclear weapons as a source of security: “Nuclear weapons make a unique contribution in rendering the risks of aggression against the Alliance incalculable and unacceptable. Thus, they remain essential to preserve peace” (NATO Summit Communique, Washington D.C., April 23–24, 1999, para 46).

If secure and stable states like Canada sign on to statements hailing weapons of mass destruction as agents of peace, countries in the midst of enduring strife, like India, Pakistan, and Israel, as well as North Korea and Iran, feel all the more justified in acquiring nuclear arsenals for their safety.

The Spread of Small Arms

At the other end of the weapons scale, where small arms like pistols and widely used automatic rifles like the AK-47 are located, the argument is much the same—more guns mean more safety. But around the world, the evidence is otherwise. The combination of regional wars, urban crime, and firearm suicides produces a total of some 500,000 small arms related deaths per year—one person every minute (*The Small Arms Survey 2002: Counting the Human Cost*, Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 155).

The argument is much the same—more guns mean more safety. But around the world, the evidence is otherwise.



Even after wars have ended, the weapons remain in circulation and continue to wreak havoc—undermining social stability, obstructing development, exacerbating human rights abuses, and generally fostering “cultures of violence.” Given their proliferation and devastating impact, small arms have been justifiably labeled weapons of mass destruction—one victim at a time.

Discuss: How willing are we, as individual Christians and as churches, to express concern about military spending, the renewed interest in nuclear arms, and about the spread of small arms?

Another indication of the prominence of the idea of armed safety is the uncontrolled international arms trade—whose promoters urge us to believe that not only will arms make us safer, but their unrestrained sale will make us more prosperous.

These are the kinds of worldly notions Paul warns us about: “Do not model your behavior on the contemporary world, but let the renewing of your minds transform you, so that you may discern for yourselves what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and mature” (Romans 12:1–2, New Jerusalem Bible). Had he used today’s parlance,

he might have said, you’ve got to think outside the box.

And thinking outside the conventional security box will help us to understand that human security is intricately linked to development and to creating the kinds of economic, social, and environmental conditions that are conducive to sustainable peace and stability. Democracy and good governance are similarly essential to counter political marginalization and to support respect for human rights.

Discuss: This article emphasizes the role played by the United States in the world. How fitting is this?

Disarmament measures are essential to security in that they prevent easy access to the tools of war, and, of course, diplomacy is central to promoting development, democracy, and disarmament and to the peaceful management of political conflict and building up a rules-based international order.

Churches Can Assist in Disarmament

Churches have made an important contribution to emphasizing the centrality of disarmament to security.

In nuclear disarmament, churches have led the way in challenging the morality of maintaining and threatening the use of weapons of mass destruction. Any use of a modern

nuclear weapon in urban areas would produce deaths measured in the millions, not hundreds or thousands. In 1983, a broad range of Canadian church leaders met with then Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau and told him that “we can conceive of no circumstances under which the use of nuclear weapons could be justified and consistent with the will of God, and we must therefore conclude that nuclear weapons must also be rejected as means of threat or deterrence.”

How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, “Your God reigns!”

(Isaiah 52:7)


Small arms are also increasingly the object of international control efforts, and churches in Africa have been particularly active on the issue. The director of the Fellowship of Christian Councils and Churches in the Great Lakes and Horn of Africa says the churches “have a biblical mandate to affirm the fundamental value and dignity of human life,” and that getting control over the small arms menace is central to that affirmation.

In Mozambique, the Christian Council has developed an innovative “swords into ploughshares” gun collection program to deal with the millions of weapons remaining after the end of the civil war there. When weapons are turned in, agricultural tools are provided, and many of the gun parts are given to artists who have shaped them into extraordinary sculptures that toured the world bringing attention to the small arms problem.

One other key disarmament objective is to bring the now reviving international arms trade under strict international controls. An international Steering Group of non-governmental organizations, with the support of the Canadian Council of Churches through *Project Ploughshares* as well as churches in other arms exporting countries, has drafted and is promoting an “arms trade treaty” that would formalize legal restrictions on arm transfers to countries engaged in human rights violations and persistent internal violence.

Discuss: John Stott, an evangelical Anglican minister and educator, calls himself a “nuclear pacifist,” being opposed to the use of such weapons under any circumstances. What do you think about his position?

We Can't Isolate Ourselves

We live in an interdependent world, and part of the task of the church is to help us understand that invulnerability is not an option. Our well-being depends on others, as well as ourselves. We can't isolate ourselves within an armed fortress; instead, we have to be active participants in transforming the world into a place where interdependence is not regarded as a threat but as the fundamental ingredient of community. 

Notes:

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9 COFFEE AND COCOA—THE PLEASURES OF THE ELITE

The sticky web of international trade

Marvin Frey

The global international trading system is not working for many of the world's poor people.

– World Bank 2001

When a man tells you that he got rich through hard work, ask him: 'Whose?'

– Don Marquis

If rich people could hire other people to die for them, the poor could make a wonderful living.

– Yiddish Proverb

For most Christians living in Canada, the World Bank quote reads like a distant reality. But for the majority of the global community, including Christians, this is a reality which they know all too well. This chapter seeks to explore the current realities associated with international trade and how we as Canadian Christians might respond.

Context: (The Realities)

- More than 2 billion people (one-third of the world's population) live on less than \$2 U.S. per day. Over the past 15 years, these people have become poorer despite the fact that overall global wealth has increased.
- In the past 15 years, there has been a growing divide between developing countries that have become wealthier through increased trade (such as China, India, Hungary, and Mexico) and countries that have become poorer due to the reduced value of their trade (such

as most countries in Africa, the former Soviet Union, Algeria, Egypt, Iran, Myanmar, Pakistan, and Venezuela).

- The disparity of wealth generated from trade also relates to the products that are traded. Most manufactured and petroleum products have benefited from price increases. Many commodity prices have fallen. Between 1997 and 2001, copper prices fell by 27 percent, cotton prices by 39 percent, and coffee prices by 66 percent. The price of food declined by 31 percent, the price of agricultural raw materials by 20 percent, and the price of minerals, ores and metals declined by 17 percent (UN Sources).
- In summary, the gap between the rich and poor is increasing despite increased trade and development assistance.

Coffee as a Case Study

Coffee is a part of the everyday lives of billions of people all over the world. North Americans consume more than 4kg of the drink per capita per year, which averages out to about two cups per day for every man, woman, and child. In 70 developing countries, coffee is also the livelihood of 20 million workers of all ages who pick over six million tonnes of beans annually.

This makes coffee the second most traded commodity (only the trade in petroleum products exceeds the coffee

trade). Yet, farmers are often paid only one-third of the cost of production. The case can be made that we enjoy our morning cup of coffee at the expense (or on the back) of the coffee farmer.

Maria Ramos doesn't understand why she works so hard and earns so little. A single mother in the village of Tauquil, high in the rugged mountains of northern Nicaragua, Ramos works her hillside farm with her two children. She produces organic coffee for which she earns a higher price than she would if she produced it by other methods, yet world coffee prices have fallen so low in recent years that she cannot earn enough to make ends meet.



“It’s a disgrace. I produce a good coffee, yet what I get paid for it barely keeps us alive,” Ramos said. “I get up every morning and listen on the radio to hear the price of

coffee in New York. It’s always low these days. I could get depressed, but what good would that do me? I can cry, but crying won’t help me buy shoes or food for my children” (Oxfam).

What is important when you go shopping?
Generally buying decisions are shaped by:

Price: I buy at Canadian Tire because of the price and selection. Don’t bother me with anything else.

Convenience: I buy at Safeway because I can run in and get what I want without long lineups or other hassles. Sure, I know it is cheaper elsewhere but my time is worth the extra cost.

Value: When I buy clothes, price and convenience are considerations but I’m more interested in values such as;

- Brand: The brand of my shoes and jeans are important. I want my brand of clothes to match that of my friends;
- Quality: I’m willing to pay extra to know I’m buying quality. You’ll never see me driving a KIA.
- Customer Service: I like when the sales clerk helps me because then I won’t end up with the wrong colour or size.
- Ethics: I like to know where the clothes were made so I can be sure they were not made in a sweatshop.

Take time to ponder: What shapes my buying decisions? Do my Christian values affect my buying decisions?



Cocoa

The cocoa trade is even more disturbing. A December 24, 2002, Toronto, *Save the Children* news release reports the following:

“The world’s chocolate industry has come to be associated with the worst forms of child labour. Racked by civil war and with cocoa prices rising to a 17-year high, the situation in Ivory Coast, the world largest producer of cocoa is forcing West African children out of work and into even worse forms of slavery as child soldiers, to be exploited in the sex trade and in domestic servitude. Over 40 percent of the world’s cocoa beans come from this war-torn country where thousands have been displaced, hundreds of people have been killed and youth have been recruited into the conflict.”

Are We Obligated to Effect Change?

Can we take comfort in Jesus’ words “The poor will always be with us”? Or do we need to ask the tougher questions: Is it ethical? Is it God’s will that we enjoy our morning cup of coffee or our afternoon chocolate snack

when the people that produced the coffee and cocoa are being underpaid and exploited?

Norm Ewert of Wheaton College argues that God's vision of shalom should inform our purchasing and trading practices. What is God's vision of shalom? Following are a number of Bible passages and observations that Norm uses to give us some clues.

Ezekiel 16:49–50 emphasizes responsibilities to the needs of the poor. “Now this is the sin of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy. They were haughty and did detestable things before me. Therefore I did away with them as you have seen.”

In 2 Corinthians 8:13–15, Paul, referring to Israelites gathering manna in the wilderness, emphasized the importance of sharing and living with enough. “Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality. At the present time, your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. Then there will be equality, as it is written: ‘He who gathered much did not have too much, and he who gathered little did not have too little.’”

In James 5:1–5, James warns rich oppressors that even if they can get by with paying low wages, their deeds will not go unnoticed:

What we can do:

Learn more about the conditions in which people work to produce the things we buy. Suggest this as a topic for a Sunday School class or ask your pastor to preach a sermon on this topic.


When you are shopping, ask the sales clerk for information on the working conditions of the people that made the product. If they're not able to answer your most basic questions, it may mean that they don't know, or even worse, don't care.

Buy your coffee, gifts and home décor products at a fair trade store such as Ten Thousand Villages, check your supermarket for fair trade coffee (check the label or ask a sales clerk), or check the Web for fair trade products.

Ask your church or work place to switch to serving fair trade coffee. Many churches have already made the switch.

Join an advocacy campaign to communicate to the Canadian government that you care about global working conditions and that they should do more to help the poorest people in the world, either by ensuring better trading conditions or development assistance. Our government is an active member of organizations such as the World Trade Organization and World Bank and can push for changes that benefit the poorest of the poor.

Notes:

“Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming upon you. Your wealth has rotted, and moths have eaten your clothes. Your gold and silver are corroded. Their corrosion will testify against you and eat your flesh like fire. You have hoarded wealth in the last days. Look! The wages you failed to pay the workmen who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty. You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence. You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter.” 

Discuss: How does your understanding of God’s will reconcile with the above scripture passages? Are there other scripture passages that better reflect your perspectives? Share your views with others in your church or discussion group.

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10 THE GOLDEN RULE: WHOEVER HAS THE GOLD, RULES

Materialism and the simple life

Menno Plett

I adore simple pleasures. They are the last refuge of the complex.

– Oscar Wilde

It is said that for money you can have everything, but you cannot. You can buy food, but not appetite; medicine, but not health; knowledge, but not wisdom; glitter, but not beauty; fun, but not joy; acquaintances, but not friends; servants, but not faithfulness; leisure, but not peace. You can have the husk of everything for money, but not the kernel.

– Arne Garborg

Our society teaches us to use our money, possessions and power for our own benefit. We can attend courses to learn how to become rich quickly. We can hire firms that specialize in wealth management. We are socialized to believe that our salary, incomes of friends and peers, the value of our house and our social status all should influence how we look at things. Material variables also greatly influence how we read the Bible. Our pocketbook has a significant impact on our beliefs.

Biblical teaching on both wealth management and attitudes towards material possessions is at odds with western capitalist market-driven economic thought. Jesus taught us to share, not to horde. Jesus taught us to manage, not to be controlled by material possessions. Jesus' message to the rich young ruler was straightforward and uncomplicated. He addressed the fact that the young man's god was what he possessed. The things he owned, owned him, and came between him and God. What did

Jesus mean when he asked him (Mark 10:21) to sell all he had and follow him?

Discuss: How much of our status as Christians depends on what we own?

Stewardship

Scripture instructs us to be stewards, or managers, of the time, energy, and material things we have been entrusted with. We are to have an attitude of management and not of ownership. It is not uncommon for us to develop an attitude where we rationalize our preoccupation with wealth creation as good stewardship. How often do we hear individuals who are frugal, hard driving, shrewd and thrifty being referred to as good stewards? Is there a risk that greed may be mistaken for good stewardship?

Size of the Pie

There are those who would have us believe that there is an infinite supply of opportunities and resources in this world, and that locally, nationally, and internationally everyone has potential access to these opportunities and resources. Is that true? I believe that the pie is not as large as we make it out to be.

If I as an individual capture more opportunities and control of the world's resources, then other individuals have less.



If I as an individual, Canada as a country, or the western world as a region, capture more opportunities and control more of the world's resources, then other individuals and other countries have less. This may be the way it should be from a secular, economic perspective. Is it right from the perspective of one who, being made in God's image, is seeking to follow Christ's teaching and life example?

Discuss: How do you respond to the statement that North Americans need to take a smaller portion of the "pie" of opportunity and resources?

Environment

It is difficult for us to discuss the issue of managing resources and possessions without in some way including a discussion on our environment. How does our striving to own more affect our environment? What effect is our lifestyle having on our environment both locally and around the world (surface water pollution, green house gas emissions, melting of polar ice caps)?

In some Christian circles, it may even be acceptable to see the term *environmentalist* in an insulting way. Should we think in terms of creation care? We have been given the mandate to care for, to manage, and to live in our environment (Psalm 24:1; Colossians 1:19–20; Romans 8:19–22; Leviticus 25:23). How we manage our resources and set priorities affects our environment.

Does my lifestyle result in an improved or degraded environment? How big a footprint does my life make on the environment, which has been created by God, and is commonly owned? Do I treat the environment as a sacred trust or do I “mine” the environment, assuring that I, my family, my immediate community, and my nation realize maximum profits at the expense of the environment?

Community

The community is an important consideration when thinking of money management, stewardship and investing.

To what degree does our society shape our thinking about who we are responsible for? Most of us have little problem understanding our responsibilities towards those we are closest to—our spouse, our children and our immediate family. But to what extent am I also responsible to a wider community both nationally and internationally?

To what extent do my money decisions favour one community over another? To what extent do my decisions provide tacit support to those with power and wealth? To what extent do my decisions disempower and disenfranchise the “have nots” of this world? Does biblical teaching influence my decisions to the point where my decisions may, in fact, result in less profit for myself, but more justice for others?

Creative Giving

Our society is highly structured and well organized. This extends to the giving we do. We have a socially acceptable way of giving. Mennonite thrift and Protestant work ethic have taught us to work hard, maximize our earnings, look after our own needs (including some wants), and then to give a portion away through charities, the church, and causes that we deem worthy.

The neat thing is that, if we do this, with some planning even our giving can work in our favour. Instead of our hard-earned money heading to Ottawa, or provincial capitals to

be used for purposes our governments decide on (roads, infrastructure, sponsorship programs), we can direct our funds to causes and efforts we support, both locally and internationally.

To what extent are we locked into a particular kind of giving? Essentially many of us earn funds through various means, and then decide on how to spend those funds. Providing financial support through charitable giving is one of the main ways that we support causes where others are being provided with some kind of assistance.

What are some other ways for us to give? One way might be not to earn the money in the first place. Assuring that one's workers are well paid, and looking for reduced profits when making deals with people who could benefit from our assistance, are just two ways of giving (sharing) before the money is earned.

Being able to give funds I have earned puts me in a position of power. Might it be good for me to give in ways where my power is reduced? Giving of my time, my energy and my creativity are life-giving ways of sharing. We all know of many opportunities to give in non-financial ways. Christians are called to different kinds of service. There may be times and seasons in our lives when one way is more suitable than another.

Generally speaking, involvement beyond our cheque

book is positive. Sharing of ourselves and sharing others' experiences can further our understanding. We may become more vulnerable to the needs, hurts, pains of others, but the response may well be a Christ-like one.

Discuss: To what extent are Christians responsible to wider community, both nationally and internationally?

Our Responsibility to the Poor

Jesus' lifestyle and teachings were the exact opposite of the way our culture would have us live. Jesus taught us to walk with the poor. Our society teaches us to be upwardly mobile, and to isolate ourselves from the poor, and when we give, to do so in a way that may placate our guilt but leave us disengaged from the plight of the poor.

Without going into a long discussion of the reasons of poverty, including structural reasons and our part in that system, let's remind ourselves of what Jesus taught:


“When asked what must be done to inherit eternal life, Jesus said that the greatest commandment was a twin affirmation: ‘Love God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind and love your neighbour as yourself’ (Matthew 22:37–39). This is a commandment about relationships, not law; about

who we must love, not simply what we must believe or do” (*Walking with the Poor*, Bryant L. Myers, Orbis Books, 1999).

Discuss: What is our responsibility to the poor?

Tension of Values

In life we prioritize and we make value judgments, and in the process we decide whether to allow current social values or Jesus’ teachings and life example to determine how we conduct ourselves in the area of finances and economics. This process may well result in producing some tension. This is normal. There is such a difference between Biblical teaching and societal norms; if there were no tension this might be cause for concern. This tension leads to making life-giving, life-promoting decisions. Consider this tension as a challenge but also as an opportunity. This is one of the ways God speaks to me.

For the Christian faith to have meaning and value, it must have ready application outside our edifices where we worship God communally. Jesus died in the centre of the marketplace. His life and death brought meaning to people in society—in the rough and tumble of the marketplace. 

Discuss: Christians should normally feel tension in responding to Christ in the midst of societal pressures. What has been your experience?

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Notes:

11

CREATION: IT ISN'T JUST PASSING AWAY!

On stewardship of Planet Earth

Glen Klassen

And Man created the plastic bag and the tin and aluminum can and the cellophane wrapper and the paper plate, and this was good because Man could then take his automobile and buy all his food in one place and He could save that which was good to eat in the refrigerator and throw away that which had no further use. And soon the earth was covered with plastic bags and aluminum cans and paper plates and disposable bottles and there was nowhere to sit down or walk, and Man shook his head and cried: “Look at this God-awful mess.”

Art Buchwald

To cherish what remains of the Earth and to foster its renewal is our only legitimate hope of survival.

Wendell Berry

Yes, some scientists say—the universe *is* passing away. It can only become colder and darker as the distant future unfolds. In the end matter and energy will be so spread out that nothing more can happen. This is called the heat death of the universe.

Other scientists dispute this pessimistic view and speculate that the information richness of the universe may well continue to increase indefinitely. Eventually the earth will be swallowed by the sun, but before that happens we will have exported the information accumulated by our culture to some other part of the universe. We will survive in digital form!

What does Christian faith have to say about the future? Christians trust that the future will be very different from both the pessimistic and the optimistic views of secular scientists. We believe there is a loving God who owns the universe and whose intention for the future of the world is that it will become something much more wonderful than what it is now.

God is the owner of everything—plants, animals, people, rocks and stars. Genesis tells us that he was a proud

owner and that he appointed people to be the guardians of his interests. Sometimes critics call this Christian view of nature anthropocentric or human-centred. They claim that we have harmed nature as a result of this belief. This has often been true in human history, but it has been just as bad or worse under non-Christian regimes as under so-called Christian ones.

Arrogance toward creation seems to be a common human failing. But we as Christians should be especially careful to avoid it. Our view of nature should always be theocentric or God-centred. In the great hymn to Christ in Colossians we are told that “all things were created by him and for him” (Colossians 1:16). The seas and forests and grasslands are here not just for us. They are here for God who expects us to look after them while we also get sustenance from them for ourselves and our families.

We Must Regard Creation Highly

What does it mean to be God’s stewards? First of all, it means that we must regard creation just as highly as God does. When Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37), he was trying to say that the ethical scope of the priest and the Levite was too narrow. Their definition of the neighbour whom they should love as themselves did not include the anonymous injured man.

Only the Samaritan knew how broadly his compassion should flow.

We now realize that fields and rivers and wild species can also be severely injured by human activities. Can we broaden our ethical scope to include the ecosystem? Are we ready to tie up its wounds and pay the bills in order to give it a chance to heal?

Discuss: Biblical stewardship is related to Planet Earth. How can belief that Planet Earth has a God-intended good future influence our hope and actions as Christians?

The good steward must understand what the owner’s final intentions are for his property. Will it be preserved or will it be disposed of? In Romans 8:19–21 there is a fairly clear theological discourse on the participation of creation in the ultimate future of the world:

The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated



It is our job as God's stewards to learn how to change human activity so that future generations will still have healthy natural systems in place.

from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.

This passage raises many questions that are hard to answer, but the main thrust of it is clear enough: The natural world participates in some way in the Christian hope. What is the Christian hope? Paul summarizes it in Philippians 3:20–21:

But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.

The two passages teach that both nature and the Christian wait in eager expectation for the same transformation that has already happened to Jesus in the resurrection. Jesus, humans, and the natural world all go from being part of the created world of matter to one of new creation. For us it will be the transformation of our “lowly” bodies, which are part of the first creation, into bodies that are “glorious” like Christ’s.

Discuss: It’s suggested that the planet is like an injured traveler in need of help. How useful is that imagery to you?

For the natural world, the same words are used, especially the word *glorious*. Our present bodies are lowly, not because matter is distasteful, but because the coming creation is more interesting, perhaps in the way that a picture in colour is more interesting than one in black and white.

Creation is to be Renewed

Theologians think that the first creation was out of nothing. In the beginning God began to create a world of matter that was completely novel. It depended for its reality entirely on the will of God and nothing else. The

new creation as inaugurated by the resurrection of Christ, however, is not created out of nothing. It is created out of the old creation.

There is a striking continuity between the old and the new. Christ's resurrection body bore the scars of the wounds inflicted on Jesus of Nazareth. The risen Christ still had an appetite for fried fish. The transformation was radical, but it left much of the old intact. The faithful steward must grasp the importance of this intended continuity because it means that nothing that is good is lost—it becomes the seed of the new creation and will reappear in “glorious” form.

What then, must the good steward do here and now?

Discuss: What more can North American Christians do to care for God's creation? What should we do?

Human activity on our planet tends to degrade the very systems on which life depends. Even in biblical times, overgrazing on the fragile hills of Palestine led to deforestation, erosion, and loss of soil. In modern times human industry threatens the air and the water that future generations will need to live. Exploding modern populations leave less and less room for wild animals and plants, and vast cities cut millions off from any contact

with nature. If these trends continue, the result will be ecological death within a few generations.

Stewards of the Earth

It is our job as God's stewards to learn how to change human activity so that future generations will still have healthy natural systems in place so that life can thrive into the far future. Our activities must be sustainable. At the end of our tenure we should be able to hand over that which was entrusted to us in good conscience.

There is good evidence that carbon dioxide and methane are building up to highly abnormal levels in the atmosphere due to burning of fuel and intensive agricultural practices. We don't know for sure that this is causing the global warming that is melting glaciers and ice caps, but do we want to allow it to get worse? What if the human contribution to global warming, even though it may be small, is just enough to trigger major climate change? The least we can do is to try to stop additional accumulations of these gases.

Carbon dioxide and methane are produced by the growth of bacteria on organic matter in fields, waters, and in the intestines of animals. About 98 percent of the excess carbon dioxide in the air comes from the burning of fossil fuels in power plants, in furnaces, and in the internal combustion engines that make transport of ourselves

and our stuff possible. That's about six tonnes of carbon dioxide per Canadian per year.

Discuss: How can we encourage and support one another to make lifestyle changes to cause less harm to the Earth's air, land, and water?

We can reduce this significantly by driving smaller and more efficient vehicles and by buying stuff produced close to us so that it does not have to be trucked or flown in from far away. We can live in small, well-insulated homes, and go easy on winter heating and summer air-conditioning. We can encourage government and industry to promote new inventions that are kinder to the environment, such as the hybrid car.

As North Americans, our greatest environmental responsibility is air quality because we contribute to this problem all out of proportion to our numbers and because the effects are global. The problems associated with water, soil, forests, biodiversity and population growth are more local, but still of great concern for us as stewards. Although great damage has been done, especially to water reserves, to vast tracts of soil, and to biodiversity (a rich variety of species), there is still much natural unspoiled

creation out there. We have the opportunity to act before it is degraded. Let us be faithful.

Is creation just passing away? No! God loves his world and will redeem it and transform it. We must also love creation, and the efforts we make to restore it to health and to keep it healthy are not in vain. Somehow the good we achieve now as stewards will be made glorious in the new creation. ^{Flc}

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Notes:

12 WAITING FOR CHRIST'S COMING, BUT NOT SLEEPING

The Second Coming and social justice

Glen Koop

Choice of attention—to pay attention to this and ignore that—is to the inner life what choice of action is to the outer. In both cases, a man is responsible for his choice and must accept the consequences, whatever they may be.

W. H. Auden

This is the duty of our generation as we enter the twenty-first century—solidarity with the weak, the persecuted, the lonely, the sick, and those in despair.

Elie Wiesel

This world is in terrible shape! Where is our sovereign God? Who is really in control? The Lord's return, no doubt, is much closer than it has ever been. If the New Testament writers believed it was imminent then, we may be nearer by "two days" or "two thousand years" (2 Peter 3:8).

What can we do? Is there something we definitely ought to do? I believe God would have us act in a number of ways.

Pray

One of our responses should be to pray. This may be individual or corporate prayer. It could be the inner silent cry of a heart and mind heard only by God, or the audible cry heard by God and humans. It could be spontaneous, the confession of the Psalmist, the repeating of The Lord's Prayer, a benediction from Paul or Jude, the praise of a fellow saint, or the church corporately crying for revival.

Study God's Word

Second, we need to study God's Word. We need to see the failures and the successes of God's people of the past and learn from them. We begin our study with Moses, the Law, and the sacrificial rituals of Israel. Did not God say, "Obey my commandments" (Exodus 20:1–26; Deuteronomy 5:1–33)? And did not God give them an elaborate sacrificial system of offerings—burnt offerings, grain offerings, fellowship offerings, sin offerings, and guilt offerings (Leviticus 1:1–7:21)?

But then, with the prophets, beginning with Moses and moving on to Isaiah and Jeremiah, the greatest prophets of the Old Testament, do we suddenly receive a different view? No! It's an additional view of God's will (Deuteronomy 10:12–22; 14:22–29; 16:9–12; 24:17–22; 26:12–13; 27:19; Isaiah 1:1, 10–18; 10:1–2; 58:1–14; Jeremiah 6:20; 7:21–26; 17:26–27; 19:3–6). God's children are to be involved in social concerns for the poor: Widows, orphans, Levites, and strangers. They are to be involved in social justice, too!

The problem of God's children in the prophets' days was similar to ours today. Doing the immediately visible seems to be much more important than meeting the needs of the poor over an extended period.

Suppose a framing carpenter takes his children for a ride in the city of Winnipeg and shows them all the houses and apartment blocks "he built." Well, in all honesty, the father

was one among many carpenters and trade workers doing the construction job—but framing is the most obvious to the sidewalk superintendent. But like a person who works with insulation, are we willing to do what is hidden?

Can God's children be so readily encouraged to focus on something or someone other than Jesus Christ that we



God sent Jesus to this world to walk among us, heal, feed, raise the dead, express love to children, teach his followers to love and forgive, and to die for the whole world's sins.

totally miss the purpose of our life on earth?

God sent Jesus to this world to walk among us, heal,

Discuss: Are we willing to do what is hidden?

feed, raise the dead, express love to children, teach his followers to love and forgive (Luke 4:18–19) and then make the extreme sacrifice, dying for the whole world’s sins. And Jesus was willing to do it for us!

Paul makes it quite clear in Romans 3–12 that faith justifies or makes a person righteous before the Father, resulting in a life-giving sacrifice to God, the obligation of those who have faith. James says the same thing in his epistle: “You have faith; I have deeds. Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do” (2:18). How can we ignore the needy, who, like us, are created in the image of God?

Deeds of Kindness

This takes us to Jesus’ story in Matthew 25:31–46. Jesus tells his audience about the Great Judgment when the Son of Man comes in his glory with all his angels. He sits on his royal throne and the people from all nations are gathered before him. And then, like a shepherd separating the sheep from the goats, he separates the people. He will

put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

“Then the king will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me... Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’”

Those on his left were sent away accursed. They had not perceived people’s needs and given them food, water, hospitality, clothing or visited the sick or imprisoned in their needs. “Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it for me.’ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life” (Matthew 25:34–46).

The evidence is there. The ones on the right had faith and followed it up with deeds of kindness. It was something

Discuss: What are the social concerns in Romans 12:7–8, 13, 20?

that came naturally with the new birth. It was a result of faith. It was the outcome of a living sacrifice.

There is no question we on Planet Earth are in a serious situation. War faces many, and many people are killed. Many rebellious peoples desire freedom, security and peace at any cost. And there are powers that seek to control by force. Changes are creeping up on us, and we are not sure where they will take us.

Discuss: In North America, it seems easy for us to become self-absorbed and unaware of the needs of others. Why is this so?

But is this different from what ancient people faced during the times of empires: Assyrians, Babylonians, Greeks, Romans or—more recently—the British? There was a remnant of faithful, God-fearing people during these times. What did they do?

The Old Testament frequently says “the earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it” (Psalm 24:1, 50:12; Exodus 9:29, 19:5; Job 41:11) and the New Testament repeats it (1 Timothy 4:4; 1 Corinthians 10:26).

Eugene Peterson paraphrases 1 John 5:18–19: “The God-begotten are also the God-protected. The Evil One can’t lay a hand on them. We know that we are held firm by God; it’s only the people of the world who continue in the grip of the Evil One” (*The Message*, p. 599). Chapters 1 and 2 of Job seem to support this.

This raises questions about God’s sovereignty and control. Have our theologians answered these questions?

What can we do about the problems, the terrible conditions in the world?

We could take the ostrich approach, run away from the Evil One, and then hide our head in the sand. We could refuse to watch evil news on the television screen or read evil news in the papers.

We could take the approach of the powerful, and force people to change with whatever means we have on hand—guns, knives, imprisonment, punishment, deception. We could return an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.

Take God’s Approach

Let’s use the approach of God. Let’s take risks. Let’s give life rather than take life. Let’s turn from the negative to the positive; begin with godly thoughts rather than evil. Let’s anticipate the transforming work of God in Christ Jesus in human lives. Let’s return good for evil.

Discuss: List the social concerns found in James 1:27, 2:1–13, 2:14–17.

What are your thoughts about personnel in the different fields of service: Medicine, education, politics, trades,

farming, ministry, homemaking, journalism and others? Do we see all but the one we are in as being corrupt, evil and rotten to the core?

Let us take a look at the world. The world is God's (Psalm 24:1), and Satan rules the hearts and minds of many (1 John 5:19). Satan uses all kinds of tactics to force people to listen to his voice. God, on the other hand, works with love, patience, mercy and finally with judgment.

God also seeks to work through his children. That was always his plan, whether through Israel of old or the church of today. This includes born again believers, followers who are in relationship with Jesus Christ on a daily basis. Like Israel, we are to be God's messengers, the servants, the slaves God is using to change the world.

Israel assumed they were God's children through their father Abraham. They made another assumption, which was to accept the law in trying to obey God. They fell into ritualism to which God responded with thorough disgust (Isaiah 1:10–17).

The challenge before us is manifold: Will it be ritualism without thinking, or will our rituals lead us to serve God by serving needy human beings? What shall we be busy with until he comes?

Maranatha! Come, Lord Jesus! 

Discuss: What shall we be busy with until Jesus comes?

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Notes:

13 ON LIVING WITHOUT ALL THE ANSWERS

Why grace shouldn't cause us to freeze with indecision *Ward Parkinson*

Choosing involves plunging ourselves personally and passionately into the issue in question, allowing ourselves to be changed as part of the deciding process.

David Clark and Robert Rakestraw

It is better to debate a question without settling it than to settle a question without debating it.

Joseph Joubert

We can try to avoid making choices by doing nothing, but even that is a decision.

Gary Collins

As you have worked your way through this book, you no doubt have wrestled with many challenging issues. Several may have sparked lively conversations. Maybe you've had to agree to disagree on certain points. Maybe you haven't made up your mind, and need more time to study more or just think things through.

Not all matters are addressed in Scripture, and not all Scripture is clear, so pursuing further discussion and study is a natural response. But there is a danger in overanalyzing and never arriving at any course of action. What happens when real life confronts you and a decision is called for? When you have to act, unsure of the right and wrong?

Tough decisions are a fact of life, and life is not always black and white. This chapter will offer navigational help when, ethically, the path is shrouded in grey.

We begin by looking at the character of God. From the first verse in the Bible, we understand that God is active. God spoke the universe into being (Genesis 1). The action

of God is evident not only in the original creation, but also in how he sustains what he has created right to the present. Other Scripture shows that when God gives his word, the action is as good as accomplished (Numbers 23:19).

Discuss: Why do you think we fall short of taking action on certain issues?

Of course, the whole salvation story shows careful readers of the Bible that God has been active in his relating to humankind (John 3:16, Romans 5:8). It is clear that God is a God of action. It is also clear in Scripture that we are to imitate God in this regard (Ephesians 5:1–2, 1 Peter 1:13, James 2:17, 1 John 3:18).

Why do we avoid taking action in matters of right and wrong? I suggest two reasons. First, for fear of doing the wrong thing we do nothing. Wary of a misstep, we take no step at all. Second, we often prefer to debate an issue to death and leave it there. We consider the matter properly complex and are satisfied by our astute analysis. Now, when someone asks, we are ready to graciously respond with our wisdom. The New Testament warns against being satisfied with such a stance (James 3:13, 17–18; 4:17). So neither the fear of doing the wrong thing nor the rigour

Grace offers us freedom to act according to the Spirit without fear of condemnation, and we are protected by the confidence that if God be for us, who can be against us.



of careful analysis should prevent us from seeking to be people of action.

There are three principles that form the basis of our ability to take action in Christian ethics. One has to do with freedom, one with guidance, and one with special gifts from God.

The Principle of Grace

The first principle is based on the doctrine of grace. In short, we are freed and protected by grace. In Romans 5:2, Paul declares that those who are in Christ stand in grace. This means that our standing before God is one of peace and reconciliation based on our justification made possible through the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ.

Further in Romans Paul states that we are “under” grace, rather than under ceremonial law (6:14–15). The happy consequence of this new standing is the Christian’s ability to serve God in a new way (Romans 7:6). The new way is through the guidance and power of the Holy Spirit, rather than following a written code.

This grace offers us both freedom and protection. We are free to act according to the Spirit without fear of condemnation, and we are protected by the confidence that if God be for us, who can be against us. This, of course, gives us no license to willfully sin, which Paul takes great pains to clarify. But it does give us confidence that we can act according to the Spirit’s leading, and that we can make a difference—that we are moving in the will of God.

Discuss: What difference does it make that Christians are under grace and not under law?

The Principle of Love

Where the principle of grace gives us freedom, the second gives us guidance. In Christ we are guided by the principle of love. The New Testament teaches that the law of the old covenant can be encapsulated within the two commands that Jesus said are the greatest: Love God and love your neighbour (Matthew 22:37–40).

It is the law of love that will guide you and propel you to serve God and your neighbour wholeheartedly and in a comprehensive way (Romans 13:8–10). How does this guidance relate to our actions as Christians in ethical dilemmas? I believe it provides a question to add to any criteria we might already be grappling with: What is the loving response of action in this situation?

Be careful here, though! Notice that this question is *added* to other biblical criteria already considered in a particular instance. It will not suffice as the *only* test question applied to ethical issues. Some have erred in this direction and concluded that mercy killing, abortion, or even adultery are the most loving actions in a given situation. We must always submit to the whole counsel of Scripture. Nonetheless, the royal law of love can guide us into action.

It will guide us first in motivation and perseverance. In Romans 13, Paul describes a continuous indebtedness that we all have. It is a debt to love one another. If we truly want to show our love to God and serve Him, we will express it through loving those around us (1 John 2:10; 4:20–21). Love for God and fellow human beings will keep us on the playing field. It will take us the second mile (1 Corinthians 13:7).

Secondly, I believe putting this love into action will guide us through increasing discernment. Paul teaches that it is

when we offer ourselves in worship and service that we “test and approve” what is God’s will (Romans 12:2). It is when our love abounds in knowledge and insight that we are “able to discern what is best” (Philippians 1:10).

David Clark and Robert Rakestraw say this: “Choosing involves plunging ourselves personally and passionately into the issue in question, allowing ourselves to be changed as part of the deciding process” (*Readings in Christian Ethics*, Baker Books, 1996, p. 282).

Interestingly, this law of love not only guides, but, like grace, liberates. James calls it the “royal law” and the “perfect law that gives freedom” (James 1:25; 2:8, 13). Again, James is quick to point out that this freedom is not license to act as you wish in selfishness. Indeed, to act in love is to consider the interests of others as more important than your own.

Discuss: Can you give an example of when you had to decide a course of action on the basis of the law of love?

Rather, the law of love is that which warns you not to take advantage of weaker brothers and sisters, or cause them to falter in their own Christian walk (Romans 14:15, 15:1–2). The very law that gives freedom is also self-restricting.

Guided by Spirit and Church

A third principle also provides guidance for living without all the answers. Here Christians can give thanks for two gifts: The Holy Spirit and the church. We can rely on divine guidance through the indwelling Holy Spirit. Many times in Acts we discover that the apostles received specific direction through the Holy Spirit. They relied on Him for their next move at times. Isn’t it reasonable to expect that the Holy Spirit will still direct His people in the same way?

The main way He will do this today is through the illumination of the written Word of God. But He will also do so directly in certain circumstances.

One of the distinctives of our Anabaptist tradition is the understanding that the task of interpreting the Scriptures belongs to the community of faith. So the second gift God has given to believers for guidance is the body of Christ, the Church.

Discuss: Where does prayer fit within the principles above? Give some specific situations.

In times of uncertainty, we can turn to trusted brothers and sisters in the faith for advice and guidance. If mature Christians advise against a certain decision or a course of

action, we need to reconsider it.

It is wise to submit to the direction of the Body of Christ as it is exercised under the authority of Scripture. Again Clark and Rakestraw make a powerful observation here: “Overconfidence in our abstract thought short-circuits the personal and communal struggles that can so powerfully cultivate genuine humility and interdependence upon the people of God. Perhaps it is through such struggles that we learn best to make moral judgments in tune with the radical ethics of the kingdom” (p. 283).

Let us follow Jesus with a heart for action, trusting in His grace, His love, His Spirit, and His people. ~~For~~

Notes:

Discuss: How do we take action on issues as the Body of Christ in the local church?

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Joyce Carlson, *Dancing the Dream: the First Nations and the Church in Partnership* (ABC Publishing, 1993).

Paul Chartrand, ed., *Who Are Canada's Aboriginal Peoples? Recognition, Definition and Jurisdiction* (Purich, 2003).

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From the *EMC Statement of Faith*:

4. The Dignity of the Human Race

We believe that God created the human race, both male and female, in his own image. We believe, therefore, in the sanctity of all human life, regardless of age, ability or stage of development (Genesis 1:26–27; 2:7, 16–17; Exodus 20:13; Psalm 139:13–16).

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Archie Penner, *The Divine Covenants: Conflict or Harmony* (self-published, 2002, sec. ed.).

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Ronald J. Sider, *Christ and Violence* (Herald Press, 1979).

Glen Stassen, ed., *Just Peacemaking: Ten Practices for Abolishing War* (Pilgrim, 1998, sec. ed.).

John Roth, *Choosing Against War: A Christian View* (Good Books, 2002).

Website of Mennonite Heritage Centre, Mennonite Church Canada: www.alternativeservice.ca. It highlights the contributions of conscientious objectors in the Second World War.

John H. Yoder, *Nevertheless: varieties of religious pacifism* (Herald Press, 1992, third ed.).

The Constitution, Evangelical Mennonite Conference (1994)

From the *EMC Statement of Faith*:

9. The Life of Peace

We believe in the life of peace. We are called to walk in the steps of the Lamb of God, the Prince of Peace. Everything about his life, his teachings and his redemptive death on the cross, summons us to a life of nonviolence.

As nonresistant Christians, we cannot support war, whether as officers, soldiers, combatants or noncombatants, or direct financial contributions. Instead of taking up arms, we should do whatever we can to lessen human distress and suffering, even at the risk of our own lives. In all circumstances, we should be peacemakers and ministers of reconciliation (Isaiah 53:3–9; Matthew 5–7; 28:18–20; John 18:36; Romans 12–13; Philippians 2:3–4; Colossians 2:14–15; Hebrews 1:1–2; 2:14; 1 Peter 2:9, 20–23).

From under *Church Practices*:

9. The State

We believe that God has instituted human government. We also believe that this arrangement of government includes two basic functions: directing the interaction of society and serving as God's agent of wrath or punishment.

Christians should respect civil authorities and pray for them; pay taxes; assume social responsibility; oppose corruption, discrimination, and injustice; and obey all their requirements that do not conflict with the Scriptures.

Concerning the second function of the state, that of serving as God's agent of wrath, the Scriptures urge Christians never to exercise vengeance but to leave it to God's wrath. Authorities carry out this particular function; Christians leave vengeance to God.

We should determine all matters concerning the Christian and the state by carefully interpreting the Scriptures with a deep sensitivity to the moral problems involved (Matthew 4:8–10; 5:39–48; Luke 4:5–8; John 12:31; 16:11; 18:36; Acts 4:19; 5:29; Romans 12–14; I Timothy 2:1–3; Titus 3:1; 1 Peter 2:13–17; 1 John 5:19; Revelation 13).

The *EMC Handbook* contains a statement on Non-Resistance (IX.5–IX.6) adopted by an EMC national body (1991). It looks at what nonresistance does not mean, refers to different approaches in interpreting Scripture, gives reasons for being non-resistant, and lists practical implications of the doctrine.

CHAPTER 8: The Arms Race and the Search for Security

A tutorial on the non-proliferation treaty (relating to nuclear weapons) is available at www.nti.org/h_learnmore/npttutorial/index.html. The material was prepared by the Center for Nonproliferation Studies at the Monterey Institute of International Studies.

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Ronald J. Sider and Richard K. Taylor, *Nuclear Holocaust and Christian Hope: A Book for Christian Peacemakers* (IVP, 1982).

CHAPTER 9: Coffee and Cocoa—the Pleasures of the Elite

International Fair Trade Association (website): www.ifat.org.

KAIROS: Canadian Ecumenical Justice Initiatives (the inter-church coalition for justice and peace in Canada) has a program addressing global economic justice (www.kairoscanada.org/e/economic/index.asp).

MCC has held a series of consultations on the impact of economic globalization on people and partners around the world. Info from these consultations can be found at www.mcc.org/globalizationconsultations.

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Ten Thousand Villages (website): www.tenthousandvillages.ca.

The Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance has an initiative called, Trade for People, Not People for Trade. The website is www.e-alliance.ch/trade.jsp.

CHAPTER 10: The Golden Rule: Whoever Has the Gold, Rules

Bruce C. Birch and Larry L. Rasmussen, *The Predicament of the Prosperous* (Westminster, 1978).

Vernard Eller, *The Simple Life* (Eerdmans, 1973). Out of print; available online at www.hccentral.com/eller3.

Mary Jo Leddy, *Radical Gratitude* (Orbis Books, 2002).

Bryant L. Myers, *Walking with the Poor: Principles and Practices of Transformational Development* (Orbis Books, 1999).

Dave Schrock-Shenk, ed., *Basic Trek: Venture into a World of Enough* (Herald Press, 2002).

Ronald J. Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* (third ed., Word, 1997).

Arthur Simon, *How Much is Enough?: Hungering for God in an Affluent Culture* (Baker, 2003).

CHAPTER 11: Creation: It Isn't Just Passing Away!

From the EMC Statement of Faith:

3. The Creation

We believe that God created everything as revealed in Scripture (Genesis 1–2; Exodus 20:11; Nehemiah 9:6; Job 8–39; Psalm 8; Mark 10:6; John 1:3; Colossians 1:15–17; Romans 11:33–36; Hebrews 1:1–3).

Models of Creation (EMC ministerial presentation, 1985).

Thomas N. Finger, *A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology: Biblical, historical, constructive* (IVP, 2004), chapter 10, *The Last Things*.

Joanne Moyer, *Earth Trek: Celebrating and Sustaining God's Creation* (Herald Press, 2004).

Calvin Redekop, *Creation and the Environment: An Anabaptist Perspective on a Sustainable World* (John Hopkins, 2000).

Renewing the Sacred Balance (website) www.faith-commongood.net. This is an ecumenical faith-based initiative concerned with renewing creation.

Arden Thiessen, *Toward a Theology of Earth-Keeping* (EMC Ministerial, 1990).

CHAPTER 12: Waiting for Christ's Coming, but Not Sleeping

Ronald J. Sider, *Good News and Good Works: A Theology for the Whole Gospel* (Baker Books, 1999).

Evangelicals for Social Action (website): www.esa-online.org. This is the organization Ron Sider is involved with.

CHAPTER 13: On Living Without All the Answers

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John Dear, *Disarming the Heart: Toward a Vow of Nonviolence* (Herald Press, 1993).

John Dear, *Living Peace: A Spirituality of Contemplation and Action* (Doubleday, Image Books, 2001.)

James McGinnis, *Journey Into Compassion: A Spirituality for the Long Haul* (Meyer Stone Books, 1989).

Mary Jo Leddy, *Radical Gratitude* (Orbis Books, 2002).