

The Case for Social Righteousness

By Cynthia Rigby

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Packing Our Bags: The Promotion of Social Righteousness in Context

Its Meaning Then and Now

The concept of the promotion of social righteousness will not resonate immediately with many contemporary readers. One reason is because it is not a term used as commonly these days as it was during the Progressive Era (ca. 1890–1913). Christian believers today tend to understand themselves as either enduring an ungodly culture (neither *in* the world nor *of* it) or living in barely distinguishable relationship to the world (both *in* the world and *of* it). Those who see themselves as “enduring” might, at first glance, understand the promotion of social righteousness to be ultimately futile.¹ The second group might have the impression that promoting social righteousness is presumptuous: “Who am I to tell others what is right to do?”

Christian believers involved in the Social Gospel movement at the turn of the twentieth century perceived themselves as being *in* the world, but not *of* it. Their conviction was that teaching and living according to the mandates of the gospel would lead to the transformation of the society in which they lived. Christian believers who participated in the temperance movements, suffrage movements, and antislavery movements generally understood themselves to have a sanctifying role in relationship to the culture at large.

A popular manifestation of the turn-of-the-century commitment to the promotion of social righteousness is Charles Sheldon’s 1896 novel, *In His Steps*. The book had been translated into nearly two dozen languages by 1935 and was claimed by Walter Rauschenbusch, a leader in the Social Gospel movement, as the inspiration for his work. Some sources report that it is one of the top ten best-selling books of all time.²

In Sheldon’s story, a pastor named Maxwell is challenged by a homeless man to live in light of his Christian convictions. This pastor, in turn, exhorts the members of his congregation to ask themselves, before every decision, “What would Jesus do?” As church members begin to take action in ways consistent with their answers to this question, the community surrounding the church is transformed.

While the contemporary WWJD? movement (popular in the United States in the 1990s) tends to emphasize *individual* spiritual growth and renewal, the Social Gospel movement of a century ago, represented by Sheldon’s story, focused on the renewal of *society*. Instead of limiting his gaze to personal sin, Sheldon devoted himself to renouncing systemic, corporate sin.

Just as WWJD? is commonly associated with theological and political persuasions very different from those of Charles Sheldon, those who currently encourage the promotion of social righteousness have a different agenda than our forbears who included the phrase in the Great Ends of the Church. An Internet search promptly reveals numerous essays and other contemporary materials associating the promotion of social righteousness with the support of “family values,” the rejection of homosexual unions, the enforcement of severe means of discipline (including capital punishment), and the denial of abortion except in cases that threaten the mother’s life. Those most commonly associated with the phrase in the early twentieth century would probably have taken different stands on some of these controversial issues than those who commonly claim the phrase today. They were engaged in a variety of social issues: They worked to remedy the dehumanizing impact of the slave trade; they advocated for women’s suffrage; they fought for the basic rights of the worker. They believed that drinking alcohol was vile and immoral because it led to domestic violence, loss of employment, child neglect, unhealthiness, and poverty. All in all, those who upheld social righteousness were convinced that Christian believers can and should take political actions that advance the coming of the kingdom of God to earth as it is in heaven.³

To this point, we have tried to get a historical “feel” for what was and is meant by the concept of promoting social righteousness. I offer now a brief history of how scholars believe this end came to be adopted by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

Adoption by the Presbyterian Church⁴

The Great Ends of the Church, as they appear in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)’s *Book of Order*, were shaped amid the same cultural currents Charles Sheldon navigated at the turn of the twentieth century:

the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind;
the shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God;
the maintenance of divine worship; the preservation of the truth;
the promotion of social righteousness; and
the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world.

While the precise inspiration and authorship of the statement has apparently been lost,⁵ we know it was first adopted in 1910 by one of the PC(USA)’s predecessor denominations, the United Presbyterian Church of North America (UPCNA).⁶ Worthy of note, and another clue to understanding the character of the relationship between church and society in that time: this acceptance took place just two years after the Federal Council of Churches in the United States adopted the Social Creed of the Churches in 1908 (Appendix A).

The Great Ends of the Church came to be in the current *Book of Order* (see the new Form of Government) through two successive mergers of Presbyterian denominations culminating in the creation of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in 1983.⁷ Attempting to trace the story of the Great Ends’ adoption, Jack B. Rogers looks at the character of still earlier ancestors of Presbyterianism in America, the UPCNA’s precursor denominations. Rogers says these denominations were made up of Scottish Presbyterian settlers who

valued Scripture and the *Westminster Confession of Faith*. Rogers offers an interesting description of these early promoters of social righteousness:

We think of [them] as a conservative component of our heritage. It is true that they practiced closed communion. They retained the Scottish free church practice of public covenanting to make their position known on moral issues. They were for the exclusive singing of Psalms in worship, without instrumental accompaniment. And they refused church membership to members of secret societies that required the taking of oaths.⁸

While they were conservative in relation to some church practices, Rogers insists that the UPCNA and its predecessors were surprisingly progressive in other ways. For example, the Associate Synod in 1811 declared the holding of slaves a moral evil, calling upon church members to free their slaves. The other predecessor denomination of the UPCNA—the Associate Reformed Church—declared in 1853 that *all* communing members could vote for pastors. This included women, who had been previously denied such voting privileges.

Referencing the work of William F. Keesecker (elected moderator of the UPCNA in 1975), Rogers suggests that the *Westminster Confession of Faith* and the *Larger and Shorter Catechisms* were the seeds of the Great Ends, which the UPCNA adopted without controversy as part of the revision of the church's *Book of Government and Directory for Worship*. Rogers writes, "The truths contained therein and their emphases were apparently characteristic of this Christian community."⁹ He concludes,

The United Presbyterian Church broadened and deepened those earlier definitions [from their predecessors] of the purpose of the church. In the context of its commitment to both the truth of God and forbearance in love, it developed a concept of the church that balanced conviction and civility. It included a balance of biblical emphases on evangelism and nurture, worship and truth, social action and the manifestation of holiness.¹⁰

Thus, the UPCNA seems to have been a Christian community that valued both personal and public morality.

After studying the 1910 *Minutes of the Fifty-Second General Assembly of the United Presbyterian Church of North America*, Laura Elly Hudson reports on what seems to serve as evidence for the church's concern for social righteousness:¹¹

- The "Report on Reform" notes that "the Decalogue is still in force and God has founded thereon His three-fold institutions of family, Church and State."¹² Recommendations on temperance and on the keeping of the Sabbath were offered. The suggestion was made that the church ought to encourage public legislation to strengthen Sabbath observance.
- The minutes reveal that the UPCNA was involved in both foreign and home missions. The church was also invested in what it called "Freedmen's Missions,"

educating and working with African Americans in many ways. One committee report expresses a protest against persecution of Jewish Russian immigrants, though it also intones that the need to evangelize the Jews is dire if the spread of Judaism is to be contained.¹³

- A quote from the “Report on State of Religion” seems indicative of the understanding of the word *righteousness* within the denomination: “That the religious life in the denomination is vigorous is further evidenced by the activity of our membership in the reform movements which make for the ‘righteousness that exalteth a nation,’ and which operate for the betterment of social and industrial conditions.”¹⁴
- An example of the work for the “betterment of social conditions” comes from the “Report on Present Industrial Conditions.” It suggests that in employment conditions there was a widespread antagonism between the laboring classes and their employers and that “present industrial conditions open up such a great field for Christian effort in securing for the laborer a more equitable share in the reward of industry; safer and more sanitary conditions of employment; the protection of women and children from the hard conditions of industrial life; the making clear to the employer the Christian obligations of sympathy and brotherhood . . . [and the] securing for both the blessings of Sabbath rest.”¹⁵

These observations reflect the social and moral concerns of the era in which the Great Ends were written, helping us understand something of how the unknown authors of these ends understood the promotion of social righteousness. In short, the UPCNA was theologically conservative *and* socially progressive, upholding rigorous standards for personal morality and for the church’s leading involvement in the public work of remedying social concerns.¹⁶

An informative and lively article by Gene TeSelle of the Witherspoon Society describes the history of the Social Creed’s development and compares the conditions in which it was written with the conditions of our time.¹⁷ This article was precipitated by the PC(USA)’s adoption of *A Social Creed for the 21st Century*, written by the National Council of Churches in 2008, the one-hundredth anniversary of the first social creed.¹⁸ One of TeSelle’s insights affirms the very purpose of our ensuing journey: “General Assemblies of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. responded to [the early twentieth-century] ‘social awakening’ several times, adopting rewritten versions of the Social Creed and, *in typical Presbyterian fashion, adding biblical and theological backing.*”¹⁹

Our Maps: Scripture

*Matthew 6:9–13*²⁰

It is often noted that the Lord’s Prayer is eschatological in nature, looking forward to the coming of the kingdom of God.²¹ However, what is too often missed is that the prayer reflects deep commitment to and yearning for social righteousness as part and parcel of the coming of that kingdom.²² To know God as “Father” is to yearn for God’s promised kingdom, marked by the grace and love of which we have tasted. To watch for the

kingdom is to imagine what God desires, which in turn prepares us to participate in God's will as doers of justice, lovers of kindness, and humble walkers with God. When we imagine God's will and begin to live into God's creative and redemptive intentions, we make manifest concrete signs of God's kingdom on earth. Where social righteousness is promoted, bread is eaten, human beings forgive each other, and the children of God are delivered from evil.

Micah 6:8

"What does the Lord require of you?" the verse asks. The response delineates three things: (1) "to do justice," (2) "to love mercy" (NIV), and (3) "to walk humbly with your God." While Micah 6:8 in one sense reads as though we are being let off easy (after all, it doesn't launch into lengthy, detailed directions about how to prepare animal sacrifices or engage in other worship practices), anyone who is attentive to the three imperatives recognizes they are challenging to realize fully in practice.²³ These imperatives can help us *imagine* what the kingdom of God looks like and, therefore, begin participating in the concrete work of the kingdom.

Proverbs 14:34

"Righteousness exalts a nation," we are instructed, "but sin condemns any people" (NIV). This text seems to make one of the most direct references to social righteousness in the biblical witness.

Society's righteousness is the fruit of our righteousness as it is grounded in God's righteousness. In talking about *our* righteousness leading to *society's* righteousness, the word *our* refers to the human beings created in the image of God to live as God's children. By *society's righteousness*, I refer to the infrastructure, systems, and institutions that manifest the righteousness being promoted by the children of God.

In my pondering, I struggle with three major questions:

1. *Whose* righteousness exalts a nation?
2. *What* is righteousness?
3. *How* does righteousness exalt a nation?

In short, here are my responses to the three major questions:

1. Righteousness is first God's, then ours (insofar as we are grounded in God's), and then society's (insofar as the fruit of our righteousness, grounded in God's, becomes manifest).
2. According to Micah 6:8, righteousness is doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with God.
3. Righteousness exalts a nation by bringing to "earth as it is in heaven" the kingdom of God—a kingdom characterized by daily bread, forgiveness, and deliverance from evil (Matthew 6:9–13).

Notes

1. The aggressive and effective politics of the far right are not directed at changing the world as much as they are directed at preserving a space in which professing Christian believers can thrive in the midst of an otherwise (and inevitably) unrighteous world. In the terms of the Christian tradition, they emphasize what is known as the “civil use” of the law.
2. See, for example, soyouwanna.com/site/toptens/books/booksfull.html.
3. An important example of this is a recently reprinted book first published by Walter Rauschenbusch in 1907. Originally titled *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, the one-hundredth anniversary edition incorporates critical essays written by contemporary theologians under the title *Christianity and the Social Crisis in the 21st Century: The Classic That Woke Up the Church* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007).
4. My assistant, Laura Elly Hudson, did most of the research incorporated into this section of the chapter.
5. Jack B. Rogers and Robert E. Blade, “The Great Ends of the Church: Two Perspectives,” *Journal of Presbyterian History* 76 no. 3 (Fall 1998): pp. 181–186.
6. *Book of Order*, G-1.0200, footnote 2.
7. The UPCNA, founded in 1858, united with the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America in 1958 to become the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (UPCUSA). The UPCUSA subsequently united with the Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS) in 1983.
8. Rogers and Blade, p. 182.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 183.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 184.
11. The following points are drawn from an unpublished report on the minutes prepared by Hudson in 2008.
12. *Minutes of the Fifty-Second General Assembly of the United Presbyterian Church of North America*, Vol. 12 (Pittsburgh: United Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1910), p. 627.
13. *Ibid.*
14. *Ibid.*, p. 659.

15. Ibid., p. 660.
16. Wallace N. Jamison, *United Presbyterian Story: A Centennial Study, 1858–1958* (Pittsburgh: Geneva Press, 1958), p. 97.
17. To read this article, go to witherspoonsociety.org/2004/social_creed.htm.
18. For more information on the new social creed, see “A Social Creed for the 21st Century” at pcusa.org/acswp/socialcreed21st.htm.
19. TeSelle, emphasis added.
20. A shorter version of the Lord’s Prayer is found in Luke 11:2–4.
21. Praying the Lord’s Prayer when we gather around the Table of the Kingdom of God is one way we remember, and benefit from, its eschatological character.
22. One theologian who makes this connection is Simone Weil. See “Concerning the Our Father,” *Simone Weil Reader*, ed. George A. Panichas (Mt. Kisco, NY: Moyer Bell Limited, 1977), pp. 492–500.
23. Note the similarity, in this respect, to the Greatest Commandment.

Appendix A
The Social Creed of the Churches

Adopted by the Federal Council of Churches on December 4, 1908

We deem it the duty of all Christian people to concern themselves directly with certain practical industrial problems.

To us it seems that the Churches must stand:

For equal rights and complete justice for all men in all stations of life.

For the right of all men to the opportunity for self-maintenance, a right ever to be wisely and strongly safe-guarded against encroachments of every kind.

For the right of workers to some protection against the hardships often resulting from the swift crisis of industrial change.

For the principle of conciliation and arbitration in industrial dissensions.

For the protection of the worker from dangerous machinery, occupational disease, injuries and mortality.

For the abolition of child labor.

For such regulation of the conditions of toil for women as shall safeguard the physical and moral health of the community.

For the suppression of the "sweating system"

For the gradual and reasonable reduction of the hours of labor to the lowest practical point, and for that degree of leisure for all which is a condition of the highest human life.

For a release from employment one day in seven.

For a living wage as a minimum in every industry, and for the highest wage that each industry can afford.

For the most equitable division of the products of industry that can ultimately be devised. For suitable provision for the old age of the workers and for those incapacitated by injury. For the abatement of poverty.

To the toilers of America and to those who by organized effort are seeking to lift the crushing burdens of the poor, and to reduce the hardships and uphold the dignity of labor, this council sends the greeting of human brotherhood and the pledge of sympathy and of help in a cause, which belongs to all who follow Christ.