

A Biblical and Theological Perspective is produced each year by the Washington Office to provide background information to advocates on why we, as Citizen Christians, address our elected and appointed officials about public issues.

## **Bound Together: Sin, Hope and Social Change**

**by The Rev. Jennifer Ayres, Assistant Professor of Christian Ethics,  
McCormick Theological Seminary**

In sovereign love God created the world good  
and makes everyone equally in God's image,  
    male and female, of every race and people,  
to live as one community.

But we rebel against God; we hide from our Creator.

    Ignoring God's commandments,  
    we violate the image of God in others and ourselves,  
    accept lies as truth,  
    exploit neighbor and nature,  
    and threaten death to the planet entrusted to our care.

    We deserve God's condemnation.

Yet God acts with justice and mercy to redeem creation.

...Loving us still,  
    God makes us heirs with Christ of the covenant.  
Like a mother who will not forsake her nursing child,  
like a father who runs to welcome the prodigal home,  
    God is faithful still.

...In a broken and fearful world  
the Spirit gives us courage  
to pray without ceasing,  
to witness among all peoples to Christ as Lord and Savior,  
to unmask idolatries in Church and culture,  
to hear the voices of peoples long silenced,  
and to work with others for justice, freedom, and peace.  
In gratitude to God, empowered by the Spirit,  
we strive to serve Christ in our daily tasks  
and to live holy and joyful lives,  
even as we watch for a new heaven and new earth,  
praying, "Come, Lord Jesus!"

In the *Brief Statement of Faith*, as in so many other confessions in the reformed tradition, the role of sin in human life and society is juxtaposed alongside work toward, and anticipation of, the coming of a new heaven and new earth. At every turn, human life is shaped by a dual reality of sin and hope. When we view this dual reality in terms

of its social implications, as does the *Brief Statement of Faith*, we recognize its influence in our efforts toward social change.

Together, sin and hope shape both the context and the form in which we practice social witness. Sin and hope bespeak the depths of an inarticulable complexity, depths of complexity that in the same moment give rise to powerful connectedness and vast, knotty systems of suffering. As Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu put it, “... we are indeed members of one family, bound together in a delicate network of interdependence.” The connectedness itself is the way that the world and the world’s relationship to God are structured. That structure can either exacerbate suffering or communicate grace.

Sometimes, one can almost witness the increasing frustration of activists as they encounter new sources of injustice, new resistance to change and new tellings of the same old stories. The brokenness of the world seems to have a life of its own; and, despite sincere human striving, situations of injustice and suffering get worse, not better. The seemingly insurmountable character of social evil leads even the most committed activists to frustration, and sometimes weariness, fatigue or even numbness.

How can faithful activists persevere in light of this complexity and its seeming potential for despair? Walter Brueggemann exhorts us to develop a “prophetic imagination,” by which Christians expose the “deathliness” of dominant culture *and* imagine new forms of community. The message of both the prophets and of Jesus is this: things have gone wrong, and, in contrast, we are to orient the work of our lives toward a different future, which God promises and inaugurates, and in which God invites us to participate. It is in this imaginative space that social witness takes place.

According to Brueggemann, the voice of the dominant community works to numb human consciousness, a numbness that we accept in the interest of avoiding painful confrontations with death and suffering. The role of the prophetic community, however, is to reject the structures as they are, its critical task being to break through the untruths of the dominant community. The new social order imagined is, for Brueggemann, everything that the current social order is not.

If we place Brueggemann in conversation with other theological descriptions of the structure of human life and its relationship to God, we find a more complex portrait of the relationship between dominant structures of sin and the new life promised by God. Some theologians, for example, argue that the way that things “ought to be” is, in fact, the way that they structurally already *are*. The connectedness that gives rise to immense and compounded injustice and suffering is the *very same* connectedness by which creation is meant to flourish. God already has structured life on earth in an interdependent manner, so that one person’s flourishing is tied to another’s flourishing and an injury to one is an injury to all.

In her book, *Fall to Violence: Original Sin in Relational Theology*, Marjorie Suchocki has written: “We presume that the influence of God is toward interrelated communities

of well-being. Violations of well-being most certainly occur, and these violations constitute a rebellion against the well-being of the world.”

Suchocki describes a God whose greatest hope for creation is that it be intricately woven together in a structure of interdependence that cooperates toward visions of human flourishing.

Suchocki's concept of inter-dependence is reminiscent of another twentieth century theological ethicist, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who so famously exhorted listeners to brotherhood:

We must all learn to live together as brothers. Or we will all perish together as fools. We are tied together in the single garment of destiny, caught in an inescapable network of mutuality. And whatever affects one directly affects all directly. ... This is the way God's universe is made; this is the way it is structured.

These words of King would resonate, some twenty years later, in one of the greatest human rights struggles of our time — the defeat of apartheid in South Africa. In his reflections on the experience of apartheid in South Africa and the resulting Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Archbishop Desmond Tutu describes the African concept of *ubuntu* as central to the work of social reconciliation:

To work for reconciliation is to want to realize God's dream for humanity – when we will know that we are indeed members of one family, bound together in a delicate network of interdependence.

In *No Future Without Forgiveness*, Tutu does not describe God's dream for humanity as that social structure in which we *will be* bound together by networks of interdependence, but as the situation in which humanity recognizes that this is already the case. “To recognize *ubuntu*”, Tutu writes,

... is to say, ‘My humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in yours.’ We belong in a bundle of life. ... Harmony, friendliness, community are great goods. Social harmony is for us the *summum bonum* — the greatest good ... What dehumanizes you inexorably dehumanizes me.

This theme of interdependence, and its implications for the complex shape of sin, cannot be understood fully without at least some attention to reformed theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher, who famously described the root of Christian faith as “God-consciousness,” or the religious awareness of God, the perfection of which is constant communion with and dependence upon God. Christian piety is marked by this God-consciousness and involves the whole person — feeling, knowing and doing.

We might identify three major contributions in Schleiermacher's framework (developed at the beginning of *The Christian Faith*) that are central to assumptions of interdependence upon which we build social witness. First, Schleiermacher describes the development of the God-consciousness in *relational* terms. As the God-

consciousness develops and advances, it moves us *toward* God. When the development of God-consciousness is arrested, we are further alienated from God, a condition of “sin.” Both sin and hope for a new life are thus rooted in humanity’s relative relationship to God. Second, the God-consciousness drives us to seek *fellowship* with other persons —we need these communities of fellowship, the Church, in order to express faith. Finally, even apart from the God-consciousness, Schleiermacher describes human relationships in the world as shaped by a dialectic of *dependence and freedom*, a characterization that might be described fairly as a condition of *interdependence*. This condition of interdependence means that we might act upon the world in ways that either encourage or inhibit human flourishing, and that our own flourishing is also influenced by the world.

Indeed, even in our striving to live holy and joyful lives, in our watching for a new heaven and a new earth, we find ourselves “bound together in a delicate network of interdependence.” All of life should be understood as bound together, as if in a web. The web is sturdy, and very strong strands connect those things held by it. At the same time, the web can become tangled, in which case its strength becomes constricting, even deadly, instead of supportive and life-giving. In this context of a web of interdependence, with the dimensions of sin and hope that give it shape, we reflect upon the practice of social witness.

In the practice of social witness, we explicitly and intentionally confront social and political systems that inhibit the flourishing of human beings and of creation. In order to do this, social witness needs theological orientations that have some way to account for the myriad means by which this inhibition takes place as well as the myriad means by which we seem unable to change it. A theology of sin that takes seriously the interconnectedness of creation teaches us that we can, in fact, be unwittingly implicated in this web of sin, even through the seemingly most mundane of activities. Sometimes, a spider’s prey may not fully understand the vastness of the web into which it has flown. One of the great contributions made by reformed theologians toward understanding such ignorance resides in its stubborn insistence that sin always surrounds and infects us.

The practice of social witness needs a healthy theology of sin that helps us to understand this complicated and stubborn context, as well as the inner workings and limitations of our own efforts to address this context. It needs this theology because a healthy and complex doctrine of sin can serve as a source of freedom in practice, so that we are not bound by expectations of perfection. This freedom is further supported by a strong theology of grace and hope, by which we recognize God’s work for good in the world, work into which we are invited to participate.

Even as we seek to change structures that harm human beings, communities and the earth, we find ourselves bound by these very same structures. This injurious dimension of the web of interdependence is what social justice activists seek to change and in which they are, at the same time, entangled. Sin is the theological frame in which Christians can identify the sources and consequences of injustice. The reality of sin accounts for the paralysis of social activists, binding them by their complicity in systemic structures.

But we must also bear in mind that with which sin is contrasted — the flourishing of life in creation. Without a theology of hope, we have no alternative with which to compare the current situation. In that case, sin becomes less of a theological category, and more of a moral one, addressing social injustice in terms that are shared with religious and non-religious activists alike. We can all agree that things may be *going wrong*, and that we are responsible for action. But hope gives Christian activists a frame by which they discern what constitutes *the good*. Further, without hope, our entanglement in sin is not countered by God's stronger force for good in the world.

A complementary consciousness of hope and sin provides an honest account of the paradox of Christian life. We are both discouraged and inspired, both numbed and stirred, both broken and healed. An honest account of sin helps activists to accept the limitations of their efforts in light of the complex character of social sin. Mere acknowledgement of these realities, however, is not enough to nurture and compel us to engage in practices of social witness. While such acknowledgement offers us comfort when our efforts are met with resistance, inertia or failure, it does not offer us inspiration to try again.

In fact, a deep awareness of sin, might, on its own, lead us to despair instead of action. To encourage perseverance and discourage despair, an awareness of sin must be balanced by an awareness of hope. Hope is the knowledge that the present failures, the pervasiveness of suffering, and the seemingly insurmountable condition of sin binding us do not have the last word. As Paul wrote to the church in Rome:

And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

Hope is the sense of connection with something deeper, broader, and a closer approximation of the good than our human experience otherwise affords us. The connection comes from God, by whose love, poured into our hearts, we are able to pursue the good. Without hope, consciousness of sin is deadening. Without consciousness of sin, hope is foolhardy optimism.

The complementary consciousness of sin and hope is also necessary to the practice of social witness in another way. The theological orientation of hope, in light of sin, invites a peculiar sort of freedom in religious practice. This freedom is rooted in the knowledge that, given the pervasive and binding character of sin, we seek and attain the good only insofar as we participate in God's activity in the world. The accomplishment of a just world is not up to us; if it were, we would be lost. Instead, we rely on God's grace, and allow ourselves to be nurtured and challenged by it.

Here is a place where reformed theology might offer a real gift of freedom to practitioners of social witness: when it comes to the advent of the kingdom of God, God does it. We participate in it. A reformed theology of grace frees people from the "burden

of perfection,” so that we might take greater risks in practice, engaging our imagination and creativity.

So, let us neither despair nor delude ourselves, remembering the words of the Confession of 1967:

With an urgency born of this hope the church applies itself to present tasks and strives for a better world. It does not identify limited progress with the kingdom of God on earth, nor does it despair in the face of disappointment and defeat. In steadfast hope the church looks beyond all partial achievement to the final triumph of God.

May it be so.