

The Politics Of The Spirit

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This is a fresh attempt to come to grips with the question of Christian involvement in politics. The object will be to decide if possible what involvement Christians ought to have with politics in virtue of their commitment to Christianity. I do not expect the conclusions to apply to all Christians, whatever their stage of life or position in society. I expect to come to general conclusions which will have to be separately applied by individuals to their own lives, as one would expect in an ethical enquiry of this sort, which intends to use the gospel as a source. The political context of this enquiry is that of Britain in the 1970s rather than say, Latin America or Southern Africa, though our very political relationships with those parts of the world will not be forgotten.

One of the difficulties of the discussion is the ambiguity of the notion of *politics*. In a general sense politics has to do with the distribution and use of power in society. So politics in one sense is simply a matter of engaging in the operation of the accepted institutions of society which are to do with the distribution and use of power. Here conflicts are institutionalised, as in the two-party system of British politics or the union/management structure of industry. The institutionalisation of conflict is typical of Western liberal democracies, which owe their continued existence to the successful achievement of it. It is politics in this sense that Catholic laymen of the recent past were urged to take part in, i.e. to play their part in the institutions of democracy such as the political party or the trades union.

However, politics in this sense is constantly threatened with being upset by politics in a different sense, which to many people is far more sinister. This is the sense used by Harold Wilson in his famous phrase "a tightly knit bunch of politically motivated men" whom he saw as a grave threat to his government a few years ago. The occasion was the seamen's strike, if I remember rightly. And, to use another example, it is politics in this sense which caused the English Catholic bishops a few years ago to withdraw support from the Catholic Students Union because it was getting "political". Politics in this sense is seen as the *creation* of conflict or the *exposure* of conflict, depending on your standpoint. In either case it is an activity which aims at the re-distribution of power in society rather than at the successful operation of the present distribu-

tion. Politics in this sense threatens the real or imaginary consensus, in that it seeks advantages for a part of society at the expense of the supposed good of the whole. So it attacks the real or imaginary community of interest, which is why those who oppose it because it threatens *their* interest always try to establish in the public mind that it is the “community” interest that is threatened. This apparent threat to the greater good is the sinister aspect of politics. It is up to those who pursue political change to show that the community of interest as it has been defined is a fiction. Conservatives will always accuse the radical left of fomenting class war. The radical left will always point out that the war is already on and that all they are doing is bringing it into the light of day.

It is politics in this second sense that is meant by Dr Edward Norman in his Reith Lectures when he speaks of the politicisation of Christianity. In the past twenty years, he claims, there has been a very far-reaching change among the leadership of the churches. This has taken the form of the “internal transformation of the faith itself so that it becomes essentially concerned with social morality rather than with the ethereal qualities of immortality – the temporal supersedes the spiritual”.¹ Whatever we think of this description – and I will concern myself with it in a moment – Christian involvement in politics in this sense is worlds apart from the old fashioned politics of the Catholic trades-unionist or MP who enters it to uphold Catholic values in society.

Politics in the second sense then is concerned with bringing about changes in the distribution and use of power in society and as such it is a threat to the existing structures for the containment of conflict. Thus, says Dr Norman, in place of spirituality, “contemporary Christians seek a corporate reaction to what are increasingly regarded as collective sins: racism, economic or cultural exploitation, class division, the denial of human rights and so forth ... Christians are responding sympathetically to the creation of collectivist state structures, and to the secular moral assumptions that sustain their authority.” So collective action which aims at changing the law of the structures of power with a view to setting up other laws and other structures for the benefit of certain groups or classes in society is truly political in the second sense. We might define politics in this sense as “collective action by or on behalf of groups within society which has the aim of bringing about changes in the distribution of power to the advantage of these groups”. So when the World Council of Churches supports liberation movements in Africa it is clearly engaging in politics. So are Christians when they join in campaigns for worker participation in the management of industry, for the reform of the law relating to racial discrimination or sex discrimination, for more aid to the Third World, for prison reform etc. In Dr Norman’s estimation, it is the

identification of Christianity with the pursuit of goals of this kind which constitutes the deplorable politicisation which has taken place over the past twenty years.

This may or may not be true as history and it may or may not be deplorable, but it does have the merit of focussing a common contemporary meaning of politics. So in asking the question about the proper Christian attitude to politics I am accepting it in the second sense, of the pursuit of changes in the distribution and use of power in society. I will now consider some contemporary answers to the question and what sort of theological considerations lend them support. I write as a theologian interested in the relationship between theological and political realities and not as an expert in politics.

One may put forward the position that Christians might concern themselves with politics, but that this must be seen as a purely secular affair, which has nothing to do with the legitimate goals of Christianity. Christianity is in fact – to use Dr Norman’s phrase – about “human fallibility and the worthlessness of all earthly expectations”. It is not about “human capabilities”. So whatever we may do or aim at in the political arena has not eternal significance and has nothing to do with men’s salvation. Different political systems may come and go. The duty of the Christian is to stand aloof from them all, engaging in them only in so far as it is necessary to live a decent, law-abiding life in this transitory world. As for the Church itself – meaning the clergy – it should on no account get involved in politics, except in so far as it has to preserve its existence and freedom of action in areas such as worship and education. It is *in* the world looking after its own, but not *of* the world. Politics for priests can be nothing more than an evil necessity, as Dr Norman says, quoting Cardinal Mindszenty with approval.

Let us note one or two theological characteristics of this viewpoint. In the first place it holds to a number of rather sharp distinctions: between the spiritual and the temporal life; between the church and the world; between the clergy and the laity. Secondly, these distinctions are mutually reinforcing. It is the function of the clergy to be concerned solely with spiritual matters, except when evil necessity dictates otherwise. The proper sphere of action of the laity, however, is the secular world, the temporal, though this has little to do with the ultimate significance of their lives. This is found only within the church, where the clergy minister it to them by word and sacrament. Though they still live of necessity in the world, they do not seek salvation in terms of any worldly goals, but solely in terms of spiritual goals. (What these spiritual goals are, as distinct from worldly goals, we must leave open for the moment, because it is the crucial question.) The

world to them is relativised. The words of St Paul in I Cor. 7:31ff seem to confirm this well: "let those who deal with the world live as if they had no dealings with it. For the form of this world is passing away".

To someone who believes in this scheme of things it should be largely a matter of indifference what political system may prevail in the place where he lives, so long as it concedes freedom of action for the church in its own sphere: in worship, education and recruitment of members. We could see this position as the one most reasonably taken by Christians who have learned one great lesson from the revolutions of the past two hundred years: that the Church for its own preservation had better not tie itself irrevocably to any political arrangement, but study to survive them all.

In the Catholic Church at any rate there happen to be a number of residual moral issues on which the members of the Church are expected to take a united stand. In the twentieth century this list has been narrowed down to a small number which largely touch on family morality: abortion, divorce, euthanasia and religious education. For campaigns on these issues the faithful may be mobilised and unanimity is expected. For other issues however, this is not so: the morality of war, racism, the arms trade, aid for poor countries and the like. Catholics cannot be expected to agree on these matters and are free to express their own views on them. But it is difficult to believe that this freedom of viewpoint is conceded because of the importance of these issues. They also happen to be the kind of issues to which far less attention is paid in the pulpit and in the religious press—in spite of all the politicisation of the clergy that is supposed to have gone on in the last twenty years. One must conclude that it is their supposed unimportance which allows them to be left to the individual conscience. To what may we attribute this unimportance? Difficult historical questions are raised here, but I suggest for the moment that it is because they seem to be less "spiritual" in their concerns than the other issues I mentioned. The assumption that some issues are more spiritual than others may have something to do with their lack of significance for the accepted power distribution in society as it has developed during the Christian centuries. The assumption of social power and status through education and wealth on the part of the Church leadership would make it avoid giving spiritual significance to anything which could be a threat to this. So I suggest that the historical adaptation of the Church to the actual power-distribution of society has led to the particular partitioning of issues between the spiritual and the temporal that we now live with. There has consequently been a huge concentration of Christian attention and energy on the so-called spiritual matters and as little as possible on those which are considered to

be more temporal in nature. The attention and energy devoted by Catholics to the anti-abortion issue as opposed to the anti-racist issue in Britain and America is a good illustration of this. Both are issues of life and death – even though most deaths due to racism are slow rather than quick. However, a successful end to racism would drastically affect the power and status distribution in society, including the Church, whereas a successful end to abortion would leave it unchanged.

So the involvement with politics that this view of the Church will allow is minimal and defensive. It promotes real political – i.e. collective – action on the part of Christians only when the institutions and freedom of the Church itself are threatened, or when such actions will not seriously threaten the stake which some Christians have in the overall distribution of power in society.² Christian trades-unionists, Christian homosexuals, Christian black people etc. may take part in causes which affect their welfare, but not Christians as such. It will not be the Church which will call upon them to act, but their own class or sectional group in society. Anyone who has tried to interest the parish clergy in Justice and Peace issues, or in anti-racist campaigns will know what I mean. There are no direct and demonstrable links between issues of this kind, which are matters of justice in the world and the legitimate concerns of the Church. Or so it would seem.

I indicated just now that this familiar Christian attitude to political matters receives its justification from a particular set of theological distinctions: that between the spiritual and the temporal, that between the Church and the world, and that between the clergy and laity each with its own proper sphere of interest. Let us call it the “two-tier” theology. Now these distinctions have played an important part in Christian thought since the early days of the Church and I would not want to pretend that they can be arbitrarily abolished. What is wrong with them is not their existence, but the interpretation they commonly receive which severs the link between the demands of the gospel and the concern for social justice. They cut off a religious sphere from a secular one and it is to the latter that ordinary concerns for social justice are usually relegated. This is because, as we have seen concerns for justice are usually thought to be about “human capabilities”, and not about eternal verities. It is not the existence of any partitioning that I would question, but the way in which the partitioning is made and the real interests behind it. Can we come to a better idea of these things which is more in keeping with the gospel?

I do not wish to begin with the assumption that the link between the demands of the gospel and social justice is just as the modern politicising Christians say it is. It is still an open question for me as to whether the gospel demands an active engagement in

the collective, liberation politics of the day. This will have to be argued. But what I will maintain is that there is a clearly demonstrable link between the cause of social justice in the world and the demands which Jesus made on his disciples in his teaching. I believe that a closer attention to this teaching will show that the distinctions between the spiritual and the temporal, the Church and the world, the separate spheres of clergy and laity, do not have the significance that has been ascribed to them. I propose to give my attention to the distinction between the spiritual and the temporal, since the other two distinctions are largely dependent on it.

To suppose that concerns for justice which elicit collective or political action are essentially temporal rather than spiritual is to suppose that they are without significance for man's salvation. Their purpose is to bring about changes in the structure of this world, which is passing away, rather than to prepare men for the next. Now it is easy to see why political justice falls under this suspicion of ultimate worthlessness: it is because it is supposedly concerned only with *material* realities. Using Dr Norman as our touchstone of orthodoxy once again, "There are some very considerable consequences of a situation in which both the social and political morality of Christianity are derived directly from secular thought. For a start, material tests are applied to political virtue. Arrangements for human society are increasingly approved by Christianity when they attend most equitably, as it seems, to the material expectations of men." No doubt it will be conceded that not all action which aims at material relief or benefit is lacking in ultimate significance. Otherwise it would be difficult to make sense of certain well known sayings of Jesus related in the gospels: in the story of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16); the parable of the Last Judgement (Matt. 25); the saying about the right people to invite when giving a feast (Luke 14); in the encounter with Zacchaeus (Luke 19). Each of these gospel passages has its own particular point to make about the behaviour that is required of Jesus's disciples. But they all clearly link material relief with the afterlife of the people who gave it, or should have given it: "And they will go away into eternal punishment and the just into eternal life" (Matt. 25:46); "You will be repaid at the resurrection of the just" (Luke 14:14); "Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham", (Luke 19:9). The connection in the story of the rich man and Lazarus is too obvious to detail. So it seems that what these people did – or failed to do – was of ultimate significance. The spiritual took the form of a material action. No purely "spiritual" goal was proposed other than the material relief of suffering.

Now it will immediately be pointed out that there was nothing

in the least *political* about these actions. They were individual acts of benevolence, not done in pursuance of any collective goal nor in satisfaction of any demands made by the recipients. It was all a matter of the “haves” giving to the “have-nots” and not of the “have-nots” demanding their rights. It is charity, not social justice, that is being commanded by Jesus in these gospel passages. It is those concrete, individual acts of compassion and relief of suffering which any man or woman ought to undertake whenever the need and the opportunity arises. Granted that their salvation depends in some sense upon their making this kind of response to suffering when they come across it, the command is addressed to the potential givers, urging them to give, and not to the potential recipients, urging them to claim their rights. Still less is there any command aimed at the disciples of Jesus urging them to politicise the poor. There are several places in the gospels where the poor are promised ultimate satisfaction for the injustices done to them by the rich, but this is always to be awaited from the hand of God himself in his final judgement and never from the political activities of men.³

There is a good deal of weight in this objection and I do not think that political action in the sense in which I have been discussing it is anywhere directly commanded in the gospels. Such collective political activity as did exist in Jesus's time – that of the Zealots – was not joined with or recommended by him. According to Cullman,⁴ three important conclusions may be drawn from the gospel evidence about Jesus and his relations with Zealotism:

1. Throughout his entire ministry, he had to come to terms with it. His major and recurring temptation was to adopt the role of Zealot Messiah, which is why he always avoided discussing the idea of his being Messiah. He gave evasive answers, talked about the Son of Man instead and directed people's attention to the Suffering Servant motif, especially at the Last Supper.
2. Jesus renounced Zealotism very forcefully throughout his career. He rejected the idea of Zealot Messiah and the theocratic hope as satanic, notably in the desert temptations, at Caesarea Philippi and probably also at the Last Supper (Luke 22:24-31).
3. He was condemned to death by the Romans as a Zealot. The title “King of the Jews” on the cross could mean nothing else. And he was clearly classed by the Romans with Barabbas, who was certainly a Zealot. We must note in this connection that Jesus had at least one Zealot among his disciples and there is evidence to support the idea that Judas Iscariot and even Peter may have had Zealot connections (Cullman). He certainly knew Zealots at first hand. The party was particularly strong in Galilee and “Galilean” could be used to mean Zealot, as it probably was at his trial (Luke 22:59). It may have been that the collaborationist party of the chief priests and the elders of the people got him denounced to the Romans as a hard-

case Zealot because they were afraid of the challenge which his teaching presented to their authority and position in the power structure of Judaism.

Why did Jesus oppose Zealotism so strongly? It was a nationalistic guerilla movement which aimed at the expulsion of the Romans and the establishment of a Jewish theocratic state: a kind of religious terrorism which worked by assassination and incitement of riot. There is no evidence that it aimed at the re-distribution of power within Palestinian society as a whole, except that there would probably have been a purge of the priesthood and other rich collaborators had the Zealots come to power. But that would scarcely have constituted a social revolution. The opposition of Jesus to the Zealot cause may be explained by the fact that the Kingdom of God could not possibly have been identified with a Jewish State set up by force of arms, characterised largely by its enmity with other nations. That could not be acceptable as the goal of a thousand years of prophetic activity looking forward to the establishment of God's justice among all men.

In rejecting Zealotism, Jesus rejected a version of Judaism which was not faithful to the prophetic religion of Israel's past.⁵ Zealot religion was thoroughly apocalyptic in nature. It believed that God had a plan for the whole of history, which is running its predetermined course to its predetermined climax. The religious interest therefore was directed towards the climax and to the calculation of its time through discernment of the signs. This end would consist in a final overthrow of all Gentile powers, the re-assertion of God's rule over the nations which, unlike Israel, had rejected it at some remote epoch. There would be vindication for Israel but wrathful judgement for the nations. The remnant of the Jewish people who had been faithful to the law would themselves be the agents of this victory, led by a Messiah designated by God as David had been. According to Luke 17:20ff and Acts 1:6, Jesus warned his disciples against any preoccupation with signs and with attempts to pre-empt the end of history, which was the Father's concern alone. Moreover, He makes it clear by his association with tax-collectors and sinners that his interest is more in the "lost sheep of the house of Israel" than in those zealous for the purity of the nation. A forced and violent establishment of the Kingdom would have left no room for these people.

So in rejecting the cause of national liberation as it presented itself, Jesus was also rejecting a whole pattern of religion which was opposed to his mission as he saw it. Now there have been plenty of people who have seen in this rejection a general rejection of all political resistance to oppression and injustice. As I mentioned above, the gospel seems to attribute the establishment of justice to the sovereign intervention of God rather than to the

collective activities of men. However, I think we should resist such a conclusion, for two reasons. In the first place, if Jesus refused Zealotism, he also refused its opposite. He fought also against the accommodation with the occupying forces which was practised by many of the leading men of Israel, the priests and the elders of the people. Their policies were dictated by class interests and the ordinary people had nothing to gain by them. There was sufficient substance in his threat to them for them to get him executed as a Zealot. If he did not have a political programme, he certainly suffered a political *fate*. What he said and did so offended the powerful elements of his society that they felt compelled to get him on a political charge.

Secondly, Israel was in a unique position religiously speaking. She had a special role to fulfil which could not be fulfilled either by nationalistic self-assertion or by compromise with the occupying powers. There is no parallel in later ages. It seems to me that we cannot draw general conclusions from Jesus's rejection of the political alternatives of his day. His unique position and that of his nation and the different interpretations of religion which were at stake preclude this.

If Jesus's attitude to the political alternatives of his day will not allow us to draw general conclusions for our own day, we seem to have reached something of an impasse. Is there nothing that will enable us to draw connecting lines between his world and ours, between the great issues of his time and the great issues of ours? All I can do now is to offer a few considerations that may help towards an eventual solution to this problem. These considerations will also help us to solve the problem about the relation between the spiritual and the temporal which I posed earlier.

The Poor of the Kingdom. In rejecting Zealot religious interests, Jesus also rejected the understanding of history on which these interests were based (Perrin). He drew people's attention away from the idea of a divine plan working up to a calculable climax in which Israel would conquer all her enemies. He drew their attention instead to a prophetic understanding of history. The prophets saw history not as a single continuous plan with a determinate end, but as a series of saving acts of God based on his saving acts of the past. In view of the fact that God had acted to save them in the past in the Exodus, the entry of the Promised Land, the Covenant with David, it was certain that he was even now acting in the events of the present to save them yet again – if only they would wake up and respond in the right way to what he was doing for them. The activity of God in the events of history was a challenge for Israel to repent and accept the rule of God. They faced catastrophe because of his activity, but they also had hope for final salvation because of it. So the religious interest is

not – as in apocalyptic religion – in the details of the master plan inexorably unfolding to the grand climax, but rather in the human response that is demanded by the knowledge of God's action. Because of what happened, something is known of God's character and interests and hence what sort of men may live at peace with him. So it is that in the teaching of Jesus, which is more prophetic than apocalyptic, the interest is thrown back on to the human response to the saving activity of God. The difference is that the saving activity of God is now manifested not in events on a national scale, but in the events of Jesus's own ministry: "Go and tell John what you have heard, the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have the good news preached to them. And blessed is he who takes no offence at me." (Luke 7:22) Other actions of his which manifested God's saving activity were his casting out of demons, his forgiveness of sins, his acceptance of outcasts and sinners at table-fellowship. For one unique period of time, God's activity was unfolding entirely in the doings of one man. Responses to his activity were responses to God's activity, as Jesus himself makes clear in several parables and other sayings.⁶

Now the response that is demanded is put in terms of making one-self fit to enter the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God is a key concept in the teaching of Jesus and it is wise to be as clear as possible about it. This is not easy, as the enormous volume of literature on the subject testifies. But one or two things are now more generally accepted than they used to be. Most importantly, the Kingdom of God does not correspond to our static idea of a territory or a state. It is a dynamic concept meaning an authority or rule. It is always in the process of being achieved.⁷ It is manifested in the continual realisation of righteousness or justice. The justice of the king is not a matter of detached adjudication, but of protection and salvation for the helpless, the weak and the poor, the widow and the orphans. A typical Old Testament usage may be found in Ps. 72: "Give the king thy justice, O God, and thy judgement to the royal son! May he judge thy people in justice, and thy poor with right judgement . . . May he defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the needy and crush the oppressor . . ." In his proclamation of the Kingdom, Jesus always speaks of it as a future reality yet something that is very near, that is even now beginning in his activity on behalf of the blind, the deaf, the lame, the possessed, outcast sinners. The most urgent task for his followers is to extend it as far as possible. The most distinctive feature of the Kingdom as it was proclaimed by Jesus was that it includes "Those people whom his contemporaries would have rejected, and excludes those of whose place in the Kingdom his contemporaries would have been most certain" (Per-

rin p. 184). The Kingdom of God is, as Jeremias says, only for the poor (Perrin p. 116). The poor and the outcast are to replace the righteous. In the passage from Luke 7 which I quoted above, it is the sixth clause which carries the stress, as we can see from its position at the end of the list (Jeremias): "and the poor have the good news preached to them." And it is precisely the preaching of the good news to the poor that risks causing the "offence" which men will be happy to avoid. There is no obvious reason why anyone should be offended at the blind seeing, the deaf hearing etc. The reason for this offence can only be that the news which was good for the poor, bringing them justice and salvation, was bad for their opposite, bringing them adverse judgement and banishment. This is the long awaited judgement of God, the fulfilment of the prophecies in the activity of Jesus.

The question we have to ask is: Who are these "poor"? If we may draw conclusions from Jesus's table fellowship, they seem to include tax collectors and sinners, the uneducated and ignorant of the law. In short, those who would be excluded from Israel's worshipping community. They are not necessarily the economically destitute, though the category is likely to include these too. But it is wider in scope because it refers not to an economic reality so much as a social one: that of exclusion from the community. Yet this community is the one on which they depend for what life they have. It included them, yet it does not include them. It lives with them, yet manages to "define them out" for all important purposes. It was this "defining out" of the lost sheep of Israel which was the unforgivable sin of the Pharisees.

There are indications that Luke and Matthew had different understanding of what Jesus meant when he spoke of the poor. For Luke it meant the actual poor (6:20, "Blessed are you poor ... Woe to you that are rich ...") But for Matthew is meant the "spiritually" poor (5:3): probably those who realise their total dependence on God. Luke probably intended his gospel for the poor disciples of Christ, suffering distress and hunger and persecution because of their discipleship (6:22). Matthew probably intended his gospel for the poor disciples too, but in the sense in which they could be contrasted with the Pharisees who opposed his church and who did not recognise their own utter dependence on God. So the original category of Jesus already received varying interpretations in the gospels written in different circumstances. This shows that we cannot settle on one particular identification, however close it may be to the original, and exclude all others which may arise in different circumstances of the Church. As in the churches of Luke and Matthew, it is necessary for us to apply the word of Jesus to the Church of today and to decide who are the poor for whom the good news is intended here and now. I suggest that the

most sure-footed application of this term would be to those human beings who are at one and the same time disciples of Christ and yet “defined out” of whatever society they have to get their living from. These at least must be included in the category of the poor. Obvious places to look for them would be among the Catholics of Ulster; among Black people in Southern Africa, and among Black people in the USA and in Britain. How we are to respond to these identifications I leave aside for the moment. It is the main question.

The Church and the World. Although Jesus in the gospels does not make statements about changes in society at large or command any political action, there is a kind of change that is most strongly commanded by him and that is the change in relationships that is to take place between men when they become his disciples. For one thing, it is only the poor – whether in fact or in spirit – who can become his disciples. And it is important to note that people can make themselves poor in order to become his disciples. Thus the rich man who asks about eternal life (Matt. 19:16ff) is invited to distribute his wealth to the poor and follow Jesus. And Peter says of himself and the others, “Lo, we have left everything and followed you.” (19:27) As the disciples found, they soon became “defined out” of contemporary society because of their discipleship. But within their own community there was to be no such “defining out”. No one on account of poverty, ignorance or weakness was to be reduced to the level of second class membership or mere survival. The early Christians clearly interpreted the teaching of Christ to mean that there were to be no operative class divisions among members of the churches, no exploitation of some members by others, no divisions caused by inequalities of wealth and power. The picture of the Jerusalem community given in Acts, idealised as it may be, at least tells us what they thought the Church ought to be like, given ideal conditions. Moreover, Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians and the letter of James both contain forceful condemnations of the rich of the communities who divide the Church by their disdain for the poor.

Now if it is true that the Church of which we are now members is in direct continuity with the Church of those days, originating in the small band of Jesus’s disciples; and if it is true that economic and class divisions were specifically ruled out by the teaching of Jesus and his followers, then at least *within the Church* some radical re-ordering is needed. We cannot pretend to be the Church which Jesus founded if we do not listen to his words about how its members are to live with one another. But the Church in which we live is now largely a copy of society as a whole, socially speaking. All the divisions of society are reproduced within the Church. All the injustices, all the inequitable dis-

tributions of power: they are all present because the Church does not exist only within the four walls of the building on Sunday. It exists in the town, in the industrial company, in the prison, in the nation, polarised between rich and poor, boss and worker, white company director in England, black miner in South Africa. That is the Church in which, in this world, Jesus demanded that there be no unjust divisions, that no one should be reduced to a life of mere survival while others live in ease and comfort with full acceptance and security. But the real relationship between different members of the Church are actually the economic and political relationships of the "world". So it is just not possible to separate the sacred from the secular or the spiritual from the temporal in the way that the advocates of the "two-tier" theology want. Jesus was not talking about the relationships that were to obtain between Christians in the *next* world – there would have been no point in issuing commands about that. He must have been speaking of the Church in *this* world.

The spiritual then is a dimension to be realised in the quality of relationships between the disciples of Jesus in this life. If they do not realise it here by their just dealings with one another they will have no place in the world to come. This is the relationship between what Christians do now and their eternal life. You cannot study the spiritual goals of eternal life without mending material relationships with your brethren in this life. This is clearly the message of the story of the rich man and Lazarus, the parable of the Last Judgment, the saying about whom to invite to your feast and the numerous sayings about acceptance of the weak, sinners, the insignificant child: they are all meant to make the community of Christ's disciples a very different society from that of contemporary Israel. It was to be a community in which relationships were mended according to the justice of God. This obviously could not be a matter of a few gifts from a person's abundance, but a complete change of life. This is the scope of the spiritual. So, while the Church is not easily separable from the world for the sake of judging the eternal significance of our actions, neither is the spiritual easily separable from the temporal.

Charity's True Purpose. This leads me directly to a third consideration. It is that the good which is to be realised in charitable action is only in a superficial sense material. What is being commanded by Jesus through the agency of material aid to the distressed is in fact the *rectification of community*, and of a particular, identifiable community, the people of God, Israel. I believe it is our habitual individualistic ways of thought that make us think of these things as being atomised episodes of "charity". The behaviour that the rich man did not show towards Lazarus, the good that the wicked did not do to the brethren of Christ in the Last

Judgment parable: it is not limited to this or that incident – it is a matter of the *refusal of community* between them.⁸ It is not just a moral quality in the agent that has ceased to operate. It is the community that has ceased to operate. There can be no community between the rich and the destitute, even though they live in the same town and are nominally subject to the same laws. In such a case the community is a fiction maintained for the benefit of the members of one class. Community (*koinonia*, “fellowship” in some English translations) means the common possession which is nobody’s in particular, but in which everyone shares because he belongs. What is at stake in the parables and sayings of Jesus against the rich who do not share their goods with the poor is the *koinonia* of Israel: the common possession of the fruits of the Promised Land which God had given freely to all his people. The refusal to share this by living in contentment with deep class divisions is a destruction of this community. But there are further dimensions to this destruction, as we have seen. Where the rich destroyed the community of Israel on the economic plane, the scribes and the Pharisees destroyed it on the religious plane by “defining out” whole classes of “sinners” – those whom Matthew calls the “poor in spirit”. Just as the economically rich denied that God had given the whole Promised Land freely to all Israel in the first place, so the spiritually rich denied that God had freely forgiven them as well as all other sinners by his establishment of the covenant with Israel. Jesus came to reconstitute the community on both counts. The enemies of his mission were both the materially and the spiritually rich. It was they who were most likely to take offence at his announcement of the good news to the poor.

So it turns out that, in Israel at least, social justice would only superficially have been a matter of satisfying material claims. The satisfaction of these claims would have been significant for salvation because it would have been the expression of the real relationships between people. It would have re-affirmed, or re-established the community first established by God. Salvation in the Bible always connotes the integration of individuals in the community of the saved. It is never merely an individual attribute, it is primarily the community which is saved and individuals only in virtue of their inclusion within it.⁹ The satisfaction of material claims is not an end in itself, but the community which expresses its existence by means of such satisfaction *is* such an end. It therefore becomes clear that political activity cannot be dismissed as being irrelevant to spiritual goals on account of its preoccupation with material things.

Conclusions. The Kingdom of God is for the poor, meaning those who “defined out” of the dominant society on which they nevertheless depend for their livelihood. The poor will constitute

it by their re-establishment of the community founded on Christ and his teachings. I have made some attempt to say where the poor might be looked for in our own time. For the sake of the argument I have deliberately restricted this category to the disciples of Christ rather than the poor of the world in general. This allows a surer connection with the probable intention of the evangelists in their use of the term. But I have pointed out the fact that the Church is co-extensive with the world so far as the socio-economic relations of its members are concerned. I do not mean, of course, that the Church is identical with the world, but that the real relations between Christians are “worldly” ones now that Christian membership is spread throughout world society. So in rectifying relationships between Christians, social and economic realities of the world are bound to be changed. It is not possible to postpone this rectification to some after-life. Even if the Kingdom in its fulness is only to be brought in by God in his good time, it is absolutely necessary to prepare for it by re-establishing the community which was the object of Christ’s activity and preaching. Mere personal piety will not do. This re-establishment cannot avoid showing itself through material justice. The question remaining then is, What action will be required of those who understand this and are in a position to do something about it? Will it be political – i.e. collective – in nature?

I think there is still a lot of theology to be done before this becomes clear. For one thing, a theology of grace is necessary: that is, a theory of the relationship between God’s action and human action. Many theologians who tackle this problem stumble into the wrong conclusions because they haven’t thought this one through. Let me just state here that on the biblical evidence alone I believe that there is no warrant for the view that, in establishing the Kingdom, God is wholly active and man wholly passive. The active/passive model is not adequate to describe the relationship between God and man. There are of course highly developed theologies of grace available. But they are not often applied very skillfully to this question. Secondly, we need a theology of community that would enable us to judge what would count – and what would not count – as true Christian community according to the gospel. If real community does not always exist where people claim that it does, what are the tests for its existence? Are there some types of society that are so inimical to true Christian community that those who wish to establish it must inevitably be counted as subversive? Perhaps it is wrong to think in terms of “establishment” and that true community is never more than “practice”. If I might borrow some thought from James Cone,¹⁰ it may be a mistake to be tied to a concept of “winning”. It is the activity of resistance that matters, It is the oppressed acting

together in the knowledge that “there is a way of living that does not involve the destruction of their persons” (Ibid. p. 220) – the destruction which is a permanent feature of their life within the society which has “defined them out” though it continues to live on their labour. It is the oppressed in society refusing to act according to the stereotypes which have been foisted on them in order to justify systematic injustices: refusing to live the lie. It is refusal to cooperate in the dominant myths of society, a refusal to see a community of interest where there is no real community of interest. It seems to me that such activity, which may in itself be the rule of God, will probably have a collective nature. The dominant lies of society are not to be defeated by the individual opting out, but by common decisions to say No to them. It seems to me moreover, that people who do this might not have a political programme but they are very likely to suffer a political fate. If so, they would be following in the steps of the Man who first preached the Kingdom of God.

- 1 *The Listener*, 2 November 1978. The text says “immorality” instead of “immortality”, but this is presumed to be a misprint.
- 2 Although this is generally true of European churches, both Catholic and Protestant, it is obviously not true now of certain sections of the church in other parts of the world, such as the Catholic Church in Rhodesia.
- 3 Most examples are from St Luke, see 1:51-53; 4:18; 6:20-26; 7:22. Matt. 12:20 may also be interpreted in this sense.
- 4 In *The State in the New Testament*, SCM 1957, pp. 8-49.
- 5 See Norman Perrin, *The Kingdom of God in the Teaching of Jesus*, SCM, London, 1963, p. 158ff.
- 6 For example, Matt. 10:40; 20:1-16; 21:28-41; Luke 14:16-24; 15:11-32.
- 7 See *Jeremias Theology of the New Testament Vol I* SCM, London. p. 96ff.
- 8 For a fuller discussion of this point, see my article, “A Christian View of Justice” in *New Blackfriars*, August 1978, p. 347ff.
- 9 The Vatican II dogmatic constitution *De Ecclesia* reminded us of this in its chapter on the People of God: “It has not been God’s resolve to sanctify and save men individually, with no regard for their mutual connection, but to establish them as a people, who would give him recognition in truth and service in holiness.” (CTS trans. p. 15)
- 10 In *A Black Theology of Liberation*, NY 1970, p. 44.