

## THE PROMOTION OF SOCIAL RIGHTEOUSNESS: The Sixth Great End of the Church

### ROMANS 10:1–13

<sup>1</sup>Brothers and sisters, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved. <sup>2</sup>I can testify that they have a zeal for God, but it is not enlightened. <sup>3</sup>For, being ignorant of the righteousness that comes from God, and seeking to establish their own, they have not submitted to God's righteousness. <sup>4</sup>For Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes.

<sup>5</sup>Moses writes concerning the righteousness that comes from the law, that "the person who does these things will live by them." <sup>6</sup>But the righteousness that comes from faith says, "Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?'" (that is, to bring Christ down) <sup>7</sup>or "Who will descend into the abyss?" (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). <sup>8</sup>But what does it say?

"The word is near you,  
on your lips and in your heart"

(that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); <sup>9</sup>because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. <sup>10</sup>For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved. <sup>11</sup>The scripture says, "No one who believes in him will be put to shame." <sup>12</sup>For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. <sup>13</sup>For, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved."

The Psalmist wrote that there is none that is righteous, no not one. And yet one of the great ends of the church is the promotion of social righteousness.

It has been more than a hundred years since these great ends were put forth, and yet the promotion of social righteousness had been a concern, a goal, an end, of the Christian church long before that time, and remains a concern for the church today. And nothing polarizes, nothing divides the church more than this issue: the promotion of social righteousness.

Let's look at the history of the promotion of social righteousness, and you will see what I mean:

First example: slavery. Most Christian churches took a position opposing slavery during the first half of the nineteenth century. The abolitionist movement was rooted and grounded in the churches. Those who operated the Underground Railroad, transporting fugitive slaves to Free states, were often leaders in their local churches. Often pastors were outspoken from their pulpits. One of those was Lyman Beecher, whose daughter, Harriet Beecher Stowe, wrote *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the book that was the Bible of the Abolitionist movement.

Now realize that for the last decade before the Civil War, it violated Federal Law (the Fugitive Slave Act) to give assistance to fugitive slaves. So the issue of civil disobedience and the promotion of social righteousness are linked historically.

Belief in the "rightness" or "righteousness" of slavery caused the formation of denominations like the old Methodist Episcopal Church (South), the Southern Baptist Convention, and the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States, which became the Presbyterian Church (US), of which this church was a member congregation from 1861 until 1983. It took 122 years to heal the division caused by an issue rooted and grounded in the promotion of social righteousness.

After the Civil War, Harriet Beecher Stowe became an advocate for another cause, women's rights, particularly women's suffrage. It seems hard to believe today when our Congressional Representative is a woman, and the State of Florida has been represented in the U.S. Senate by a woman, and our State Attorney General is a woman, that women were ever denied the right to vote. But women were also denied the right to own property.

Women's rights, the right of women to serve in the church, is an issue that divided the church once again. The first woman to be ordained as a minister of the gospel in the Presbyterian Church just celebrated her 90<sup>th</sup> birthday a week or so ago. Margaret Towner is now a member of Peace River Presbytery, where I served with her on several committees. She is still a feisty, independent woman who lives by herself and drives her own car, and regrets that she had to give up riding horses about 20 years ago.

So strong was the opposition to the ordination of women in our former denomination, that in the 1970's, the Presbyterian Church of America spun off of the PCUS, and while they cite many differences, the major distinction that sets them apart is their refusal to ordain women to any office in the church, or to allow women to speak in church services at all.

Another issue where the church became involved in the promotion of Social Righteousness was prohibition. Without the Women's Christian Temperance Union, prohibition would never have passed.

Carrie Nation, the axe-wielding symbol of the Temperance Movement, did not live to see the Constitutional Amendment forbidding the sale of alcoholic beverages pass. By the way, she was married to a minister. And the WCTU also wanted tobacco prohibited and in 1919 launched a campaign to have an amendment to the constitution banning the sale of all tobacco products.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the promotion of social righteousness focused on issues such as public school integration. The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (US) (the Southern Church) issued its call for public school desegregation in June of 1954, months ahead of the Supreme Court Decision known as Brown vs. Board of Education.

Issues such as the Peace Movement of the 60's and 70's, and even Global Warming have been tied in to the promotion of social righteousness in the churches, but perhaps the most successful and thoroughly embraced issue has been hunger. The programs that churches support that feed the hungry, that meet human need, truly are righteous, and as we influence public policy we are promoting social righteousness.