



Theological Foundations for Social Ethics

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Within the last several years Christians have been challenged by any number of social issues, each one with its own sense of urgency and importance. Racism, sexism, war and peace, economics, human rights, homosexuality—to name only a few—are among many issues that have confronted the Christian community. Claims that are made are many and diverse, and the search for clarity on any particular issue is difficult and complex. Often there appears to be uncertainty about where to begin and what to do. On what basis are positions to be taken, and toward what end is action to be directed?

One perspective that has currency today suggests that the Bible has all the answers to such questions. President Reagan, in designating 1983 as the year of the Bible, made a statement representative of this perspective: “Within the covers of the Bible are the answers to all of the problems that face us today, if we’d only look there.”¹ This perspective is characteristic of a substantial number of people for whom the Bible provides both motivation and substance for a response to the issues faced today.

Another perspective takes a rather different approach and suggests that issues in the social order are finally not a concern for the Christian and the Christian community because “religion and politics don’t mix.” This perspective is also characteristic of a substantial number of people today for whom the questions that appear to confront the Christian community present no legitimate challenge at all, because the Christian faith is concerned about personal salvation and not about questions of public policy and social order.

Both perspectives, in spite of their currency, are inadequate. Both rest on misunderstandings of the Christian faith and the nature of God’s relationship to the world. Both underestimate the importance of human experience and the social context in the development of a viable ethical perspective.

The first perspective, for example, defines God’s relationship to the world in terms of what that relationship has been in the past thus substituting a nar-

¹1983 was proclaimed the “Year of the Bible” by resolution of the United States Senate.

row, legalistic perspective on the Bible for the presence of the living God. Ethical decisions then have to do with biblical assertions given an absolute status by denying any influence to, or awareness of, historical circumstances or cultural context. Such a perspective ends up misrepresenting the nature of the Bible as well as misunderstanding the nature of God’s relationship to the world.

The second perspective, exemplified in the statement that religion and politics don’t mix,

likewise misunderstands the nature of God's relationship to the world by implying that God has to do primarily, if not exclusively, with "spiritual" matters usually defined in privatistic and individualistic terms. Faith in God in such a perspective is thought to have neither a relationship to, nor a bearing on, how society is organized and structured. Issues of public policy and social order are viewed, therefore, as separate from that for which a Christian is to have legitimate concern—his or her salvation.

If the first perspective can be said to represent many of those who have been identified as the new religious right, the second can be said to lie behind the quietism in political affairs identified as characteristic of Lutherans. It is more than a little ironic that the heirs of Martin Luther have been charged with separating religion and politics, given the two kingdom doctrine through which Luther tried to argue for God's sovereignty over all creation and for the Christian's necessary participation in the structures of temporal authority.

To some extent Luther's attempt to distinguish between the two kingdoms without separating them is itself problematic. The distinctions, when combined with an eschatology that saw existence as living at the edge of history, have often led to a negative value being placed on human, empirical, secular reality. Thus, in the kingdom of the world (temporal authority) wrath and severity are characteristic; punishment, repression, judgment, and condemnation are the work of the sword to restrain the wicked, protect the good, and keep sin and chaos at bay. Further, when combined with a two-natures anthropology, the distinctions of the two kingdom doctrine can easily lead to a denial of meaning, value, and importance to human action. Thus, in the worldly kingdom the good that is done for the neighbor does not affect the neighbor's essential health, well-being, or wholeness; that is the subject of God's action in the spiritual kingdom. Such distinctions have not infrequently resulted in a separation between religion and politics and not merely an awareness of differences between them.

These last comments suggest that the problematic character of the two kingdom doctrine may not only be due to its susceptibility to distortion and misunderstanding. There are also questions that can be raised about the adequacy of the presuppositions of the doctrine. For example,

Those significant and critical dimensions of human life which pertain to man's [sic] selfhood and fulfillment, to what we call redemption, no longer take place chiefly in the church. For most men [sic], the things of life that pertain to redemption, that is, to the meaning of human existence, to the attainment of proper selfhood, to the fulfillment of human life—these take place outside the church.²

²Philip Hefner, *Theological Perspectives on Social Ministry* (New York: Board of Social Ministry, Lutheran Church in America, 1968) 4.

If that is so, then one of the fundamental assumptions of the two kingdom doctrine no longer holds.

Furthermore, if particular questions in the social order are addressed on the basis of the two kingdom doctrine there is a tendency to proceed primarily in a deductive fashion. The doctrine then becomes the source for particular conclusions and judgments on the basis of some

rule of action derived from the doctrinal position regardless of context or circumstance.

Neither of the perspectives identified above seems particularly capable of providing the necessary foundations for a viable and effective social ethic for today. But perhaps the brief discussion just concluded can lead to the identification of several of the dimensions essential to such an ethic.

At one level the need is for a methodology which can take seriously the role of the social context and human experience in responding to questions such as those confronting the Christian community. At another level the need is for a theological perspective/model which can acknowledge the value, meaning, and importance that human reality and action actually have in efforts to respond to such questions. Methodology and perspective/model thus belong together, and the intention of the rest of this essay will be to address both of these needs.

More important in what follows than Luther's doctrine of the two kingdoms is his fundamental conviction that God is a gracious God as revealed in the death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ. God's gracious action on our behalf provides both the occasion and the reason for the effort to delineate a method and a model whereby Christians can attend to questions of social ethics.

I. A PROPOSAL

The appropriate, but also the necessary, methodology is related to what Peter Berger has called the inductive option. "The inductive option is to turn to experience as the ground of all religious affirmations—one's own experience, to whatever extent this is possible, and the experience embodied in a particular range of traditions."³ The attractiveness of the inductive option is related to the fact that it enables the construction of a social ethic which is in continuity with the fundamental affirmations of the Christian faith and witness, while responsive to the contemporary realities of human existence. In contrast to a deductive methodology which assumes a doctrinal starting point, the inductive option attempts to come to grips with the empirical details of any particular social issue and the context in which it arises. It asks about what the situation actually is, and it accords to those who have the relevant experience and knowledge of the issue under consideration a major role in providing description and direction for what is to be done. The inductive option, therefore, enables an approach to issues in the social order without denying either empirical reality or the resources of the Christian faith.

Robert Preston indicates the importance of the inductive option in the following way:

There needs to be a reciprocal relationship between criteria drawn from the

³Peter Berger, *The Heretical Imperative* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1979) 62-63.

Christian faith and the evidence drawn from human experience at whatever the level up to the most expert. The criteria evaluates the evidence and the evidence refines the criteria. But there must be a firm resolve to get the evidence as far as possible. If one begins here one is going by what I have called the inductive method.⁴

Such a method characterizes much of the work of moral theologians today, but the

reciprocity involved needs even a stronger affirmation than that suggested by Preston. Evidence as well as criteria are drawn from the Christian faith, and criteria as well as evidence are developed out of human experience and the social context.

These comments on reciprocity and the inductive option can be amplified with reference to a perspective that is appropriate to the task at hand. James and Evelyn Whitehead have delineated a model and a method for theological reflection in ministry.⁵ It is adaptable for our purposes by remembering that social ethics is concerned with what is to happen in the future as well as with what has happened in the past. In other words, ethical reflection on past action is intended to support a proactive stance with respect to the issues encountered in the present. Further, when the concern is specifically social ethics the need to “get the evidence as far as possible” suggests that a probing of societal reality may be the point at which the desired reflection ought to begin.

Briefly stated, this model for doing social ethics identifies for the Christian three basic sources of information: (1) the Christian tradition including Scripture and church history, (2) personal experience and the experience of the community in which the Christian exists, and (3) culture. Among those sources the inductive option involves looking at cultural data first, thus modifying the theological tendency to begin with Scripture before considering the present situation, away of proceeding which too often never gets to the present, and thus does not come to terms with the concrete reality of contemporary life.

Cultural data as a source of information for the doing of social ethics is extensive and exceedingly diverse. Particularly important resources are philosophical understandings of men and women, political interpretations of the human community, social scientific understandings of persons and societies, and the wealth of material available in other religious traditions. Such data is often available as a result of the work of the human and physical sciences. Notwithstanding certain limitations related to matters of accessibility and usefulness, every effort should be made to secure that information which sheds light on the particular issue or concern under consideration.

The Christian tradition, as a source of information for ethical action and reflection, is also rich and diverse. The tradition is characterized by pluriformity in several senses. The biblical accounts that witness to and call forth the Christian faith manifest a multiplicity of approaches and perspectives. Likewise, throughout history the church has been characterized by more than one interpretation of Scripture and by more than one understanding of its own reality. Thus variety and pluriformity are distinctive features of the Christian tradition.

⁴Ronald H. Preston, *Explorations in Theology*, 9 (London: SCM, 1981) 154.

⁵James Whitehead and Evelyn Whitehead, *Method in Ministry* (New York: Seabury, 1980).

As with cultural data, therefore, it is necessary to sift through the information available from the Christian tradition and make judgments about what is most appropriate with respect to the particular issue or concern under consideration.

That experience which is the third source of information is not the experience that is common to a culture; rather it is composed of the ideas, feelings, biases, insights, attitudes, hopes, apprehensions, and rational and extra-rational convictions—both religious and non-religious—of an individual and his or her home community. The experience to be probed is thus

specific to an individual or group without being idiosyncratic.

The designation of three sources of information for doing social ethics recognizes that “God’s presence and action in the world is not restricted to the Christian Tradition”⁶ while granting at the same time certain limitations on the information available from each source by itself. All three sources, therefore, are significant because God’s presence and action are not absent from any of them. What is needed is a method that can attend to God’s presence “not only in the confines of Christian doctrine and Tradition, but in the perhaps more surprising areas of cultural activities and individual human experience.”⁷

Such a method is a three stage process of gathering the data/evidence from each of the three sources of information (attending), constructing and facilitating a dialogue in which the data from each source is clarified and challenged when seen in relation to the data from each of the other sources (assertion), and action which is responsive to the insights generated by the dialogue (decision).

Data gathering (the attending stage) is significantly influenced by the understanding of the issue under consideration. Some initial definition of the issue is necessary in order to avoid the danger of being overwhelmed with information and never moving beyond the data gathering stage. At the same time, the definition ought not be so conceived that the data considered useful is restricted to what is obvious, immediately relevant, or consistent with unexamined value judgments and beliefs. The danger of both extremes can be minimized by attending to the concreteness of cultural reality first. Both the willingness to seek information and then to receive and listen to it are essential.

Dialogue (the assertion stage) occurs when the data from the sources is engaged. Only when the data from each of the sources is considered in light of, not apart from, the data from each of the other sources can insight and understanding emerge. The assertion stage recognizes a mutuality among the sources to the extent that the priority usually assigned to the Christian tradition is related to its role in the formation of the Christian who is the decision-maker and actor rather than to any privileged information it brings to bear on particular issues.

Action (the decision stage) is the response occasioned by the insights that emerge out of the dialogue with the data. Action always involves risks; living with the ambiguity of what is decided is a necessary risk of any social ethic. One result may be an awareness of the significance of data that had been previously overlooked or ignored. Thus there is a reciprocity to the method that is being advocated in which each of the stages both affects and is affected by the others.

This proposal of a model and method for doing social ethics has been

⁶Ibid., 69.

⁷Ibid., 60.

relatively formal in character. Having identified the components of such a model and method it is possible to point to the general data from each of the sources in order to clarify the foundations of social ethics. The remainder of this essay will concentrate, therefore, on the first stage of the method in an attempt to identify those foundations.

II. ATTENDING TO CULTURE

The explosion of knowledge chronicled by the development of the human sciences

suggests that the amount of data available from the cultural sphere is virtually unlimited. Actually relevant data, however, will vary depending on the particular question or issue under consideration. Nevertheless, certain general characteristics of contemporary culture are significant because they bear on any and all specific issues.

The contemporary cultural context has been described by Peter Berger as the age of modernity—a “near-inconceivable expansion of the area of life opened to choices.”⁸ The most striking feature of modernity is pluralism, which is manifest in the fact that life is dominated by choice, not fate, in almost all areas of life. One of the driving forces of modernity is a technological revolution which has profoundly altered the external conditions in which men and women live.

But it is not only the external conditions of life that are affected. There is an internal dimension as well. Thus the myriad technological innovations—in labor saving devices, transportation, medicine, and communication processes, for example—do more than change what men and women do; they also change what is thought and what is expected. A modern consciousness emerges in which the expectation as well as the presence of choice is central. More and more areas of life become free of traditional patterns and taken-for-granted limitations to the extent that human beings are “confronted not only by multiple options of possible courses of action but also by multiple options of possible ways of thinking about the world.”⁹ In other words, modernity’s expanding pluralism relativizes particular world views and specific courses of action.

With options comes not only choice but the likelihood of less certainty. The “subjective” dimensions of human existence gain in importance at the same time that “objective” realities are less able to convince and draw forth confidence. The promise of modernity, pluralism, and technology is the possibility of liberation—the opportunity to shape life through the choices that are made from among the multitude of options that are available. The threat of modernity, pluralism, and technology is the possibility of alienation—the destruction of the supportive structures of life through the loosening of the human bonds that hold life together—or the possibility of a new tyranny of expectations.

It is important to remember that Berger is identifying basic trends in the modern world. There are many people for whom the possibility of a multiplicity of choices is problematic. They remain bound to traditional patterns or caught in systems and situations that provide few if any real options from which to choose. Nevertheless, the expectation of choice remains very real and the con-

⁸P. Berger, *Heretical Imperative*, 3.

⁹*Ibid.*, 17.

sciousness, if not the actual reality, of such individuals and groups is profoundly affected by that expectation.

Cultural data, therefore, suggests a situation of tremendous possibility and enormous danger. The resources for the creation of a more humane world exist along with the knowledge and resources to destroy the human world. Increasingly, men and women understand themselves in the light of the options that are available to them in all areas of life. With growing awareness of the variety of religious traditions in the world and the diversity in such traditions, individuals

are aware that such options exist in their religious lives also. Furthermore, within the Christian tradition the historical rootedness of the Bible and subsequent church history lead to the recognition that religious values and patterns of belief and action are the results of human decisions in the face of events not always clearly perceived or understood.

The mixture of human and divine that is the Christian tradition has not always been recognized, however, and it has sometimes been assumed that the Christian tradition provides data for ethical thought and action of an entirely different sort than that available from culture or experience. Such a position needs to be considered against the backdrop of historical-critical methods of research and scholarship and in recognition of the pluralism which enables, if not necessitates, a reassessment of inherited patterns and viewpoints. In other words, the data that characterizes the cultural context calls attention to certain important aspects of the Christian tradition that need attention in the development of a social ethic. In the discussion that follows the suggestion is made that among those important aspects are an understanding of the Bible and a consideration of the trinitarian reality of the God in whom faith lives.

III. ATTENDING TO THE TRADITION

It is not necessary to deny the Bible's reality as a product of human history in order to acknowledge it as a source of information for ethical thought and action. James Barr's perspective is representative of such a point of view: "my account of the formation of the biblical tradition is an account of a *human* work. It is *man's* statement of his beliefs, the events he has experienced, the stories he has been told, and so on."¹⁰ The human character of the Bible is clear; it contains both scientific and historical inaccuracies. The authority of the Bible for Christians, therefore, is one of sufficiency, not perfection and can be seen not in any doctrine of inerrancy but in the very structure of faith and in the impact it has on the individual's relationship to God through Christ which is at the center of faith.

Biblical authority is tied to the relationship of faith that it evokes. Its orientation is to the future not to the past.

The scripture provides the frames of reference within which new events have meaning and make sense. The coming of Jesus made sense only because a frame of reference was provided by the existing Old Testament. The finality of Jesus would then mean not that "revelation now ceases," but that the tradition of him in its classic and received form now becomes the framework within which events to come can be perceived and understood.¹¹

¹⁰James Barr, *The Bible in the Modern World* (London: SCM, 1973) 120.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 122.

Understanding the tradition of Jesus which is at the center of the Bible as a framework for interpretation suggests that the relationship of the Bible to any specific issue in modern life is indirect. Rather than bearing directly on particular issues, "the biblical material bears upon the whole man [sic], his total faith and life, and...out of that total faith and life *he* takes his decisions as a free agent."¹² The importance of the Bible is to be found not in its concrete prescriptions for the Christian life but in its witness to the God who is its subject and in the relationship to that

God which grows from that witness.

The historical rootedness of the Bible precludes its direct application to concrete issues in the modern world. What is not precluded is a recognition that biblical authority is a matter of orientation—that the Bible’s “understanding of God and his purposes, of man’s [sic] condition and needs, of precepts, events, human relationships...provide the basic *orientation* toward particular judgments.”¹³ Biblical authority is recognized, therefore, in its witness to God. That witness informs particular judgments on specific issues but is not the only basis on which such judgments are determined. That is not the primary intention of the biblical material, nor is the Bible of sufficient unity on particular issues to rule out the use of other data and information.

The profoundest unity is not a unity *within* the Bible, on the level of its common pattern of thought, or consisting in a balance we may discern between its different emphases, between its conflicting viewpoints; it is rather the unity of the one God, which also is a unity within a variety, and—dare we say?—a unity with a history.¹⁴

The unity that has a history—God—is a unity that also has a future. Understanding the present and future orientation of the Bible helps to prevent a simple idolization of the past that is described in the Bible. The significance of God’s past activity is not diminished by recognizing that God’s activity cannot be confined to the past. God’s history is not yet complete. God is continually creative, doing new things not discontinuous with the past but neither as a simple replication of the past.

The conviction that God’s history is not yet finished emerges out of Scripture and characterizes the witness of Christians throughout history. It is possible to note at this point a convergence of the data from the cultural sphere of information and from the Christian tradition around the realities of change and relativity.

The earlier reference to choice, technology, and pluralism as characteristic of modernity assumes the reality of change. Modern consciousness is different from that of traditional societies—it has changed. Furthermore, the expectation of change is an assumed component of modernity.

To be reminded that God has a history is not only an affirmation of God’s continuing activity; it is to see change as characteristic of God. The point at which it can be seen most clearly that God changes is in the witness to Jesus the Christ. Tom Driver succinctly notes that “the participation of God in human

¹²Ibid., 142.

¹³James M. Gustafson, *Theology and Christian Ethics* (Philadelphia: Pilgrim, 1974) 145.

¹⁴J. Barr, *Bible in the Modern World*, 181.

pain, which the New Testament dramatizes as the passion of Jesus, means that God undergoes change.”¹⁵ The incarnation, especially the passion of Jesus, is a clear indication that God changes, even more, that to some extent God changes in response to or as a result of what men and women do.

But to have a history is not only to undergo change; it is also to participate in relativity.

To be relative can imply limitation due to the concrete specificity that is a part of any particular embodiment or location in time and space. But more central to the meaning of relativity is the recognition that relatedness is characteristic of all things. Everything that is related to—relative to—something else. “Things are and are known in relation to each other.”¹⁶ To acknowledge relativity—as the culture does—and even to acknowledge relativity as an attribute of God does not mean an acceptance of ultimate arbitrariness. Rather it is an acknowledgment that relationship is a central category of existence. Indeed, all things are and are known in relation to other things, even God who is and is known in relation to all things.

Change and relativity, as descriptive both of modern culture and the God seen in Jesus the Christ, give at least a double dimension to the social ethical task. The changing reality of God as well as the changing shape and texture of particular social issues must be discerned and come to expression. Such discernment and expression is essential to any adequate Christology because Christology has to do not only with formulations about the Jesus of history. Christological formulations are also oriented to the present and to future time. To discern the Christ is to discern, and then to give expression to, the contemporary form through which God is related to and desires to enter into relationships with men and women today. That contemporary form is identifiable in its continuity with the pattern manifest in Jesus the Christ in his commitment to the liberation of all creation and God’s people. As Driver has said, “the christological task is to discern the features of this pattern in present-future time, and the only way to do this is to take with radical seriousness our ethical expectations.”¹⁷

A Christology that takes our ethical expectations seriously has implications for both the Christian community and for Christian individuals, and ultimately for the work of the Holy Spirit as well. The formation of a community consistent with the conviction that the story of Jesus is a truthful account of human existence remains a primary task for Christians. Thus, Christology, while not limited to formulations about the Jesus of history, cannot dispense with them either. It is his story that is to be told, and in its telling it both shapes and transforms the community in which it is told. A community consistent with the story of Jesus refuses to let false and arbitrary boundaries exist among people and is realistic about its limits and possibilities as well as the limits and possibilities of any societal organization as it acknowledges the importance of forgiveness in its own life.

For Stanley Hauerwas such an understanding of the Christian community is an indication that the Christian church is a social ethic before it has one: “Our theological convictions and corresponding community are a social ethic as they

¹⁵Tom F. Driver, *Christ in a Changing World* (London: SCM, 1981) 14.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 96.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 75.

provide the necessary context for us to understand the world in which we live.”¹⁸ To be a social ethic formed by the story of Jesus does not rule out diversity; it simply means that appropriate ways are sought for adjudicating the differences that follow from such diversity:

The social ethical task of the church, therefore, is to be the kind of community that tells and tells rightly the story of Jesus. But it can never forget that Jesus’ story is

a many-sided tale....To learn to tell the story truthfully...means that we, like the early Christians, must learn that understanding Jesus' life is inseparable from learning how to live our own. And that there are various ways to do this is clear by the diversity of the Gospels.¹⁹

Because there is no simple predetermined way to lay hold of the story of Jesus and no clearly prescribed rules by which it can be lived, it can be said with Hauerwas that "the concrete form of the church's social ethic will differ from one setting to another."²⁰ The Christian community, therefore, is called to the responsible use of freedom as it seeks to be faithful to the reality of a changing God and to give contemporary expression to the story of Jesus.

Likewise, the individual Christian is called to a similar responsible use of freedom. Responsible freedom is an inescapable aspect of the Christian faith and essential to discerning the changing reality of God. Both for the Christian community and for the individual, Schubert Ogden's words ring true: "The distinctive way of understanding ourselves in the world that is properly described as Christian faith in God is a way of existing and acting *in* freedom and *for* it."²¹

The freedom which characterizes the Christian life is two-sided. It is first of all a freedom from dependence or reliance on any thing except God as the one who determines life's final meaning. But the result of such freedom from all things is a corresponding freedom for all things. Once again an awareness and understanding of the essential relatedness—relativity—of all things helps to clarify the double sense of freedom. And a clarification of human freedom provides at the same time additional insight into the reality of God in whom such freedom is grounded.

The exercise of freedom assumes an interrelatedness of all things with the implication that all things, including God, act upon and are acted upon by other things. However, the extent to which men and women can act upon other things or be acted upon by other things is circumscribed. Such is not the case with God, for God acts upon—thus makes a difference to—all things, and likewise is acted upon—thus the one to whom all things make a difference—by all things. Human action and therefore freedom is grounded in God.

As creator, God sets all creatures free. God's work is "by its very nature an emancipative work in that it establishes the optimal limits of all his creatures' freedom and thus sets them free to create themselves and one another."²² This

¹⁸Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1981) 109.

¹⁹Ibid., p.52.

²⁰Ibid., p.110.

²¹Schubert M. Ogden, *Faith and Freedom* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979) 49.

²²Ibid., 90.

emancipative work of creation, however, depends on men and women exercising the finite freedom with which they have been created. Participation with God in his emancipative work is directed toward the alleviation of particular needs within the world. What is sought is the destruction of those conditions which hinder the self-creation of any other creature. God's work is to establish the larger cosmic order of nature; the work of God's creatures is to establish the less inclusive orders of societies and cultures.

As redeemer, God's work is the act of love in which men and women are accepted without reservation and taken into the everlasting life of God. Salvation includes both God's work of redemption and the individual's response to that action. The Pauline description—*saved by grace through faith*—identifies this two-sided process of salvation.

As sustainer, God furthers the work of emancipation and redemption by sustaining and empowering men and women in their efforts to give faithful and effective expression to the conviction that the story of Jesus is a truthful account of human existence.

The result of God's work in all its aspects is liberation. As creator, God liberates by establishing freedom for all things. But emancipation as God's work is dependent on the cooperation of all creatures to fulfill its promise and to overcome the tendency of systems and structures to enslave their members. That cooperation is grounded in God's work as redeemer. As redeemer, God liberates through the unreserved acceptance of men and women in spite of human sin. Redemption as God's work calls forth the human response through which the promise is fulfilled as salvation. As sustainer, God liberates by reestablishing the intention of creation on the foundation of the freedom given in redemption. Sustenance as God's work empowers men and women to attend to the injustice that distorts human relationships and prevents the achievement of an inclusive human community.

Emancipation, redemption, and sustenance are works of one divine love. But, in granting freedom, that love calls for creative response on the part of both the human community and the individual Christian in order that God's work might be continued through the active involvement of men and women in the pursuit of social justice. It is in the creative response of men and women to the love of God that the work of the Spirit is evident.

The Christian tradition is an exceedingly important source for the development of a social ethic. The tradition's diversity and pluriformity, however, necessitate the making of choices with respect to insights, understandings, and perspectives on the basis of their appropriateness to significant aspects of the Christian witness and their intelligibility with respect to human existence.

The above discussion has identified some of those insights, understandings and themes within the Christian tradition that appear to have promise as valuable resources for use in developing a meaningful social ethic. Overall, a perspective is advanced that values both the world as the context for human action and the human action that flows from the freedom that is central to the Christian faith. It is a perspective that provides support for the conviction shared by many committed Christians that action to overcome the injustice of the existing or any future social order is an inherent dimension of the Christian faith.

IV. ATTENDING TO EXPERIENCE

Additional data for developing a meaningful social ethic is also to be identified from personal and communal experience. However, the data from experience is specific to the particular person and community as well as to the issue under consideration. Thus, there are limitations to what can be said in a general way. Nevertheless, the Christian community and individual members of it are no strangers to the plurality of viewpoints and possible courses of action which are characteristic of the culture in which they live. Even where such a plurality has not been incorporated into the life of the community or the individual, its challenge is seen and

felt on every hand. Contemporary Christians experience pluralism as well as the relativity—in its double sense—that accompanies pluralism. The possibility of appreciating the fact that all meaning is a function of relatedness—relativity—is present for Christians insofar as relatedness to God is understood to be the final source of meaning.

Likewise, change is a reality experienced by the Christian community and its members even for those who try to hold it at bay. Experienced also, however, is the desire for a center which can give stability without denying the reality of change. Here the possibility exists for the Christian to find the desired center in the midst of change, rather than outside of it, especially since the God who both changes and is in the midst of change, even as we are, remains a God of faithfulness. The steadfastness of God, which is both desired and experienced as reality, is not a function of God's unchangeability but of God's presence through the Holy Spirit whose work it is to empower God's people in their efforts to give expression to the basic affirmations of their faith.

Thus, the data of experience confirms the data of the culture and of the tradition. It points to what is ahead in the present and future. It confirms both the presence of freedom in relationship to others and the necessity of its responsible use with respect to the many specific issues that are the real context and the actual starting point of a viable social ethic.

In arriving at this point, it is important to recognize that we have been exploring the theological foundations for a social ethic. Those foundations are found in a model and a method which takes "this-worldly" reality and human action seriously by attending to culture, the Christian tradition and experience as equally necessary sources of information in the development of a social ethic. There is a certain mutuality among the sources because God is active in all three dimensions of human existence and fully available in none of the three.

In a world characterized by an ever increasing plurality of viewpoints and options, there is no simple way to discern what God is doing or what our action is to be if we are to be responsive to God's action. But we can know that the freedom which is ours to attend to social issues is a freedom grounded in God's gift to us and God's dependence upon us. The real work of social ethics begins when we turn that freedom to the cause of social justice in those concrete areas of human existence where God's creation and God's people have been prevented from achieving fulfillment by our continued failure to accept our full humanity in Christ.