



Social Statements

THE LUTHERAN CHURCH IN AMERICA

ECONOMIC JUSTICE

STEWARDSHIP OF CREATION IN HUMAN COMMUNITY

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INTRODUCTION

God wills humanity to exercise justice in its stewardship of creation. Holy Scripture declares that the earth is the Lord's, and that persons created in God's image are divinely authorized to care for this earth and to share in its blessings. Since human community is dependent on responsible stewardship, God commands that persons deal equitably and compassionately in their use of the earth's limited resources in order to sustain and fulfill the lives of others.

It is in obedient gratitude for all the gifts of God that we in the Lutheran Church in America commit ourselves in faithful love to struggle for economic justice as an integral part of the witness and work of God's People in the world.

ECONOMY IN SOCIETY

The word, "economy," is derived from the Greek words which mean the ordering of the household. In this basic sense, economy denotes the activity of persons in the management of all the resources (natural, human, and manufactured) of this world.

An economic system is the pattern of relationships, processes, institutions, and regulations, together with the values underlying them, by which the activities of production, distribution, and consumption are carried out in and among societies and cultures.

Economic policies and institutions develop through social custom and political decision. The allocation of the resources, burdens, and benefits of the economy is variously done: by traditional habits, by individual choice in the marketplace, by governmental regulation, by the action of corporations, or by all of these. Likewise the institutional constraints on economic activity are made by these means separately or in combination.

Economic activity is embedded in the total life of a society. Relations of production and distribution reflect the prevailing patterns of power as well as the values by which a society lives. The material allocations within a society are both an effect and a cause of the basic character of that society. The economic choices of the members and institutions of a society reflect what a society is and influence what it is becoming.

The fundamental questions underlying any economic system are therefore political and moral in nature. There are always technical questions that are peculiar to the operation of any given system, but the basic issues are not technical in character. For example, who may work? What should motivate our labors? By whom and how should it be decided what to produce, where to distribute, and how much to consume? Who determines, and how, the "fairness" of prices, profits, wages, benefits and strikes? How do we balance economic production and environmental protection? Do our economic practices reflect or reinforce child exploitation, sexism, ageism, racism, or anti-Semitism? The answers, never final, emerge qualified and compromised from the field of contending interests, powers, and moral claims.

The organization of economic life has undergone vast changes throughout the course of history, and no economic "system" has ever shown itself to be permanent. The appearance of new conditions, the development of new technologies, and the evolution of social values and political structures have all occasioned the alteration or replacement of economic institutions and relationships.

It is in such a world of continual change, amid graphic evidence of both progress and exploitation, that the Holy Spirit calls the church to bear witness to God's sovereign reign in our midst. As the Lord of history God acts in society to judge and fulfill the daily efforts of all people in their economic theory and practice.

THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

All persons are intended to respond in worship and work as one human family to the Creator's love: to propagate, nurture and extend human life and enhance its quality; to protect and use wisely the world's resources; to participate with God in the continuing work of creation; and to share equitably the product of that work to the benefit of all people.

In a world broken by sin the Creator lovingly enables the doing of justice. Into such a world God calls the redeemed in Christ to be advocates and agents of justice for all.

THE IMAGE OF GOD

Human life depends totally on a loving Creator. All persons are made in God's image for a life of trust, obedience, and gratitude.

Life under God is also meant to be life in community. There is no humanity but co-humanity, for one cannot be human alone. It is only together that persons can realize their creation in God's image. This image is reflected as persons respond in love and justice to one another's needs. Male and female persons are created equally in the image of God. (Gen. 1:27) It is in the basic human relationships of domestic, political, and economic life that persons share in their common humanity. God's love encompasses all people, and God intends that stewardship be practiced for the benefit of the entire human family.

Created in the image of God, persons are together stewards of God's bounty. They are accountable to God for how they use, abuse, or neglect to use the manifold resources — including their own bodies and capacities — which God has placed at their disposal. Reflecting God's cosmic dominion as Creator, they are called to care for the earth and "have dominion over," but not callously dominate, every living thing. (Gen. 1:28)

WORK

Work, the expending of effort for productive ends, is a God-given means by which human creatures exercise dominion. Through work, persons together are enabled to perpetuate life and to enhance its quality. By work they are both privileged and obligated to reflect the Creator whose work they are.

Although sinful rebellion issues in burdens of toil and alienation, the forgiving and renewing Lord holds out the possibility of work as useful and satisfying, prompting the Psalmist's prayer, "Establish the work of our hands." (Ps. 90:17)

Work is thus meant for persons in community, not persons for work. While participation in the community of work is meant to enhance personal well-being, the identity of persons created in God's image is neither defined by the work they do nor destroyed by the absence of work. What a person *does* or *has* does not determine what one *is* as the personal creature of a loving Creator.

Christian identity is also not to be equated with the work Christians do. As new persons in Christ, Christians have been set free and empowered to exercise their vocation through many roles, occupations among them. However, Christians do not equate baptismal vocation in God's kingdom with economic occupations in the world.

JUSTICE

Justice may be described as distributive love. It is what God's love does when many neighbors must be served with limited resources. Justice is the form of God's creating and preserving love as that love is mediated by reason and power through persons and structures in community life. Injustice dehumanizes life and prevents full participation in co-humanity. Justice is therefore viewed simply as that which people need to be human.

God mandates the doing of justice. (Micah 6:8) The specific content of that justice, however, is not directly revealed but is discovered as life is lived amid claim and counterclaim. The discernment of justice involves every aspect of the human being. It is a task of reason, requiring the counting, measuring and classifying of factors that admit to such analysis. It is intuitive, involving the capacity for empathy. It is political, involving the struggle for power among competing groups. Above all, it is moral, involving the fundamental human capacity to know what enhances and what destroys the being and dignity of the person. That capacity, conscience, grows and is nurtured in the creative interaction of persons and groups, in the recollection of and reflection on past experience, and in the confronting of new situations.

Therefore the doing of justice is the proper stewardship of the social and material resources of creation in which our co-humanity in God's image is being realized.

Social justice refers to those institutional and legal arrangements which promote justice for all the members of society.

In addition to being the way in which God's providential love is expressed socially, justice is also the way in which sinful persons are required to do for others what, in their self-centeredness, they would not otherwise do to meet their neighbors' collective needs.

Because human beings, both individually and collectively, are self-centered, self-serving, and self-justifying, their defining and doing of justice are inevitably tainted by the rationalization of special interest. This sinful rationalization often leads to such errors as the pitting of benevolence against justice and the confusion of justice with righteousness.

Social justice should not be pitted against personal benevolence (often called charity) or corporate benevolence (often called philanthropy); but neither should benevolence be substituted for justice. In its true sense, benevolence is the loving response directly to others in need; in its false sense, it is the vain attempt to purchase a good conscience and to avoid the demand for justice. Rightly understood, benevolence and justice complement each other as different forms of the Creator's providential love.

Neither personal nor corporate benevolence can accomplish what a society is required to do for its members under justice; but a society cannot remain sound if it leaves no room for benevolent acts.

Justice and righteousness, as these terms are used in this statement, are not to be confused or identified with each other. Righteousness denotes the redeeming activity of God in Christ which effects the forgiveness of sin, new life, and salvation. It frees and empowers God's faithful servants to act lovingly and justly in the world, not merely out of prudent self-regard, but also sacrificially for their neighbors' sake.

The attempt to equate human justice and divine righteousness distorts Christ's Gospel and undermines God's law. In the name of liberty, such self-righteousness enslaves; in the name of life, it kills; in the name of abundance, it lays waste. God's holy wrath is provoked when humans presume to rule society by a spurious "gospel," thereby weakening the possibility of realizing justice, peace, and civil order under God's law.

Justice takes place at the intersection of serving love and enlightened self-interest. All sinners, including Christians, are still able as the corrupted image of God to act justly out of such self-regard; and forgiven Christians are empowered to move beyond such self-regard. By the power of Christ working in them, they are freed to enlarge the conventional limits of justice.

While the advancement of justice involves the interplay of countervailing power, it depends finally upon the degree to which the members of a community are either willing or constrained to moderate their acquisitiveness in the interest of the common good.

Justice is a painful process, serving as both the prerequisite for and the fruit of civil peace. Although never fully completed, struggles for justice draw people into the ongoing work of approximating God's will in this sinful world.

ECONOMIC APPLICATIONS

God gives to human creatures the freedom and capacity to devise the means of exercising the stewardship that has been entrusted to them. They may therefore establish such social and legal institutions as will facilitate the life of mutual responsibility for which they have been created. Such humanly-devised means are legitimate so long as they do not usurp the place of God as Lord and owner of all things or thwart the will of God for the well-being of the whole human family.

THE STEWARDSHIP OF MEANINGS AND VALUES

God enables persons to employ ideas as tools of analysis and evaluation. The fashioning and use of conceptual tools is never finished. New historical situations may require new modes of diagnosis and prescription. The refinement of appropriate concepts is a vital part of the constructive work of seeking justice.

An ideology is a set of linked ideas by which a society, social movement or interest group seeks to explain, give coherence to, and justify a given pattern of behavior or a prescriptive vision for society. An ideology may be used to elicit commitment to preserving the social *status quo* or to changing it.

An ideology can be a useful means for the securing of political cohesion within a society or for mobilizing people in support of constructive change. It can also be used deceptively to mask injustice and to elicit an ultimate commitment which, besides being idolatrous, may make people insensitive to the violation of basic human rights.

No ideology can legitimately be held to be redemptive or represented as embodying God's saving righteousness.

Christians recognize stewardship as including the right use of meanings and values in the just ordering of society and economy. Such ideological stewardship must, however, prevent any system of values from laying an ultimate claim on persons as the bearers of God's image.

As part of the stewardship of meanings and values the following principles are offered as guidance for responsible action.

GOVERNMENT

In a sinful world God intends the institutions of government to be the means of enforcing the claims of economic justice. Government should neither stifle economic freedom through excessive regulation, nor abdicate its responsibility by permitting economic anarchy. Legitimate governmental activity normally includes such functions as: protection of workers, producers, and households from practices which are unfair, dangerous, or degrading; protection of the public from deceptive advertising and from dangerous or defective products or processes; encouragement and regulation of public utilities, banking and finance, science and education; environmental protection; provision for the seriously ill and disabled, needy, and unemployed; and establishment of an equitable system of taxation to support these functions. Compliance with these and other legitimate governmental activities should be affirmed, even as their improvement and correction are sought through appropriate political means.

In extreme situations, when governmental institutions or holders of political power engage in the tyrannical and systematic violation of basic human rights, and when the means of legal recourse have been exhausted or are demonstrably inadequate, then non-violent direct action, civil disobedience, or, as a last resort, rebellion may become the justifiable and necessary means of establishing those conditions within which justice can again be sought and enjoyed.

ECONOMIC JUSTICE

Economic justice is that aspect of social justice involving the material dimension of social relationships and the social activities of production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services. Economic justice denotes the fair apportioning of resources and products, of opportunities and responsibilities, of burdens and benefits among the members of a community. It includes the provision for basic human need, fair compensation for work done, and the opportunity for the full utilization of personal gifts in productive living.

Economic justice includes the elements of equity, accessibility, accountability, and efficiency.

Understood as equity or fairness, economic justice does not mean economic equality. It is rather the result of a discerning of, and response to, the various needs of the members of a society, respecting differences without being partial to power or special interest. Equity implies a sense of the common good and a care for the diversity of gifts and human resources that contribute to it. At the same time it provides for those minimal necessities which, in a given social and cultural setting, are prerequisites for participation in society; and it provides for those members of the society who, because of circumstances not of their making, cannot provide for themselves.

Accessibility includes both the formal entitlements to political participation and legal redress, and such substantive entitlements (e.g., nutrition, shelter, health care, basic education, minimum income and/or employment) as are needed for entrance into the social and economic community. It also includes the provision of the means by which the members of a community may participate in decisions which affect the quality of the common life and that of future generations.

Accountability implies that economic actors must be held answerable to the community for the consequences of their behavior. Government properly establishes the legal means whereby people may secure compensation for injury incurred, as a result of economic decisions which have not taken account of their likely impact on personal and community well-being.

Efficiency requires a responsible use of resources that is genuinely productive by minimizing waste. This productivity is conserving not only of material resources and time, but also of human resources and the environment. The economy should be structured to permit the calculation of efficiency so as to take account of social and ecological waste.

Persons should be permitted and encouraged to participate in fundamental as well as market decisions governing the economy. Members of a society should be co-determiners of the quality of their economic life. Such co-determination, requiring differing structures appropriate for differing situations, is the basic right of persons whom God has created in co-humanity as responsible stewards.

Stewardship requires careful forethought. Planning is vital to the stewardship of material resources at all levels of human life: personal, familial, communal, and political. Planning on economic matters is more than technical. Questions of basic human value are involved in both specifying economic goals and devising the means of achieving them.

Planning should therefore be sufficiently pluralistic in character to assure the possibility of self-correction and prevent domination by one or a few special interests. It should be done on a scale and level of social life which provide for the greatest practical degree of participation and co-determination.

God has implanted in the human creature the capacity and initiative to define the problems of material existence in community and to effect positive change. No person or community should relinquish that initiative or capacity, and social and political institutions should be designed to encourage such initiative at the local and intermediate levels of society. A society is healthier when its members are encouraged to participate responsibly in determining their own lives rather than being only the passive consumers of goods and services.

WORK

Even in the present state of sinful estrangement, God's intention remains that work be

done and its fruits be enjoyed by the whole human family. The division of labor according to efficiency and the diversity of human gifts, along with the social relations of productive activity, are means by which life in co-humanity may be both extended and enriched.

Work that is beneficial to society glorifies the Creator. Those who perform such work are to be esteemed for their contribution to the common good. They are not to be judged by whether or not the work is remunerative, or by the amount of remuneration. Vast disparities of income and wealth are both divisive of the human community and demeaning to its members.

Exclusion of persons from the community of work is a denial of the opportunity of realizing the divine intention for co-humanity.

Humanly-devised economic arrangements which, in their operation, tend both to exclude some persons from the community of work, and subsequently to stigmatize such persons for not working, constitute a double affront to the Creator and to persons created in God's image.

PROPERTY

The concept of property is a legal means of determining responsibility for the use of resources and humanly-produced wealth. Property may be held by individuals, by business corporations, by cooperative or communal self-help organizations, or by government. In whatever manner it is held, property is held in trust and its holder is accountable ultimately to God and proximately to the community through its constituted authorities for the ways in which the resource or wealth is, or is not, used.

While the holder of wealth-producing property is entitled to a reasonable return, as determined contextually by the society, the holder of such property may not assert exclusive claim on it or its fruits. Justice requires that wealth be both productive and contributory to the general well-being through both the provision of new opportunities and the alleviation of human need.

The private ownership of property is a humanly devised legal right which can serve as a means for the exercise of that responsible stewardship which constitutes the divine image. Private property is not an absolute human right but is always conditioned by the will of God and the needs of the community. The obligation to serve justifies the right to possess. The Creator does not sanction the accumulation of economic power and possessions as ends in themselves.

CONCLUSION

We affirm the inseparability of the economy from the whole of human life. The criticism and reshaping of economic relations and institutions is a fundamentally moral task in which Christians should be actively involved. Economy, rightly understood, is the God-given stewardship of life.

In Christ the People of God are freed and enabled individually and corporately to participate in the quest for greater economic justice and the achievement of the conditions of human well-being. As a worldwide community of brothers and sisters, the church can summon the human family to care for the earth responsibly while God yet gives us time.

IMPLEMENTING RESOLUTION

This church calls upon its ministers and congregations to engage in an intensive study over the next biennium of the social statement, "Economic Justice: Stewardship of Creation in Human Community," with a view to ascertaining the content of this church's corporate stewardship within the present historical setting. Such study is to consider both the institutional allocation of the material and human resources of this church internally and the work of public advocacy by this church externally.

This church directs its program agencies and offices to facilitate such study through programs appropriate to their several mandates. Such work should to the extent possible be planned and executed through such means as the Staff Team on World Hunger Concerns and the Staff Team on Fiscal Support. Each churchwide agency shall report to the 1982 convention of this church the results of its study and action, as well as its future intentions in the field of economic justice.

Efforts are to be made by appropriate agencies of this church to equip both the ministers and the laity to understand and apply the orientation and principles embodied in this statement through such means as:

- 1) Seminary and college curricula;
- 2) Continuing education for pastors;
- 3) Conferences for parish lay leadership;
- 4) Church school curricula; and
- 5) Faith and Life Institutes

The Division for Mission in North America shall advise this church as to appropriate ways of implementing this statement both through advocacy in the public sector and through consultation and shareholder action in the private corporate sector.

The administrative offices of this church, in consultation with the Division for Mission in North America, shall study this statement with a view to the application of its principles to this church as a manager of resources, employer, fund-raiser, investor, and purchaser and provider of goods and services.

The Division for Mission in North America shall continue the work of issue-clarification and the constructive criticism of ideology begun during the preparation of this statement. It shall continue to involve the lay persons of relevant expertise and experience who were engaged in the development of this statement as well as others whom it may identify.

The Division for Mission in North America, through its program, Advocacy for Global Justice, shall identify and act upon the global and domestic implications of this statement as they impinge on the reality of world hunger.

This church shall endeavor to implement this statement through its inter-Lutheran and ecumenical involvements, both in North America and worldwide.