

Common Ground for the Common Good

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(A response to a public lecture by Rev. Jim Wallis on "Finding Common Ground for the Common Good" in April 2013 at St. Mary's Seminary and University in Baltimore, Maryland. Wallis's lecture and this response were based on Wallis's book entitled, On God's Side.)

I would venture to suggest that at the root of Protestantism is an ongoing quest for an appropriation of the common good. Martin Luther's call for the reformation of the church in the 16th century seemed to signal a call for Christian communities to address matters of ecclesial, theological, and socio-political significance to the masses of people. By its very nature Reformation faith and Protestantism served as a faithful protest against what was viewed – at least to some degree – as the perceived class abuses of the church and society – directed primarily toward the poor. In as much as the Protestant Reformation was to become a protest against some of the practices of the church - as perceived by Luther and others - it would also become a framework for reforming and reframing some of the practices of Christianity in the search for common ground and the common good.

The quest for such common good became one of the marks of enlightenment faith that would be the hallmark of early Protestantism in America. Martin Marty intimates in his book *Pilgrims in their Own Land*, that although early 15th and 16th century settlers in the American colonies were largely “pilgrims of dissent,” what they shared was a common quest for freedom, and that colonists were “knit together by law, religion, and custom.”¹

It seems that much of the quest for an appropriation of the common good in the late 19th and early 20th centuries can be viewed against the philosophical and ethical backdrop of utilitarianism. Although there continues to be a great deal of debate as to the merits of utilitarianism as a philosophical and ethical construct, at least in some measure, it was the

¹ Martin Mary, *Pilgrims in their Own Land*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1984), p.75.

thinking of Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, among others, and their notion of “utility” that provided the framework to talk about what is good and what it is that brings about the common good. Thus a critical question of utilitarianism is, what is it that brings about the “the greatest possible good for the greatest possible number of individuals?”

In the social teachings of virtually every American Protestant denomination that has emerged there has been an expressed concern for the common good. In foundational documents of the Presbyterian, Episcopal, Lutheran churches among other Protestant denominations, there are statements which point to these concerns for the common good within the denominations themselves, and within the context of the churches’ ecumenical and interfaith relations.

In the Methodist churches – which I am most familiar - the theology and practice of communality and common good finds its primary point of reference at the place of social holiness – where the concern for vital piety and religious practice – is coupled to (married with) concerns for acts of charity and justice – as seen in social witness, societal engagement and the common good. Thus, the primary theological mandate of the Methodist Churches was and has continued to be “to reform the nation and spread scriptural holiness.”

In much of American Christianity, and certainly in the Protestantism of the early and mid-20th century, there continued to be a clear quest for an appropriation of the common good. This is seen perhaps most clearly in an articulation of the Social Gospel by Walter Rauschenbusch. In his seminal work, *A Theology of the Social Gospel*, Rauschenbusch states that “we have a social gospel.”²

And so the Gospel, by its very nature is “social” and has communal implications.

Rauschenbusch’s ministry and work in New York City laid the foundation for a clear movement in many Protestant circles in the mid-20th century toward the predominance of evangelical liberalism – as also espoused by the likes of Howard Thurman. Like Rauschenbusch, Thurman would assert that the Gospel by its very nature is “social” and concerned with the common good.

² Walter Rauschenbusch, *A Theology of the Social Gospel* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1945), p. 1.

In one of his works, which he entitled, *The Search of Common Ground*, Thurman argues that this search for common ground is a universal search among all of humanity. He states that “A person is always threatened in one’s very ground by a sense of isolation, by feeling oneself cut off from one’s fellows. Yet, the person can never separate oneself from one’s fellows, for mutual interdependence is characteristic of all life.”³ Thus for Thurman, this common, universal quest and search for common ground becomes has teleological implications, as it essentially provides the framework for the meaning of life itself.

Thurman’s articulation of a “search of common ground” would ultimately serve as one of the primary theoretical precursors to the work of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and his articulation of a vision of “beloved community” which became the theological grounding for civil rights in America, and other subsequent human rights movements – and quest for common ground - across the globe.

Interestingly, Jim Wallis in *On God’s Side*, offers in one of his chapters that “The Beloved Community Welcomes All Tribes.”⁴ Wallis shares a quote from King that “our goal is to create a beloved community and this will require a qualitative change in our souls as well as a quantitative change in our lives.”

It is important to note that the singular theological and societal vision of Martin Luther King, Jr. was for the realization of *Beloved Community*. Kenneth Smith and Ira Zepp, Jr. in their seminal 1974 work entitled, *Search for the Beloved Community*, suggest that King’s perspective on the Christian love-ethic provides critical insight into understanding his persistent search for the *Beloved Community*. For King, it was rooted in the biblical notion of *Agape* (God’s unconditional love), and was the ultimate goal for society.⁵

³ Howard Thurman, *The Search of Common Ground* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1971), pp. 2-3.

⁴ Jim Wallis, *On God’s Side* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2013), p. 109.

⁵ Kenneth Smith and Ira Zepp, Jr., *Search for the Beloved Community* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press), see pp. 129-156.

King asserted that “all life is interrelated.” One of his fundamental beliefs was in the kinship of all persons. He believed all life is part of a single process; all living things are interrelated; and all persons are sisters and brothers. All have a place in the *Beloved Community*. Because all are interrelated, one cannot harm another without harming oneself. King said:

To the degree that I harm my brother, no matter what he is doing to me, to that extent I am harming myself. For example, white men often refuse federal aid to education in order to avoid giving the Negro his rights; but because all men are brothers they cannot deny Negro children without harming themselves. Why is this? Because all men are brothers. If you harm me, you harm yourself. Love, *agape*, is the only cement that can hold this broken community together. When I am commanded to love, I am commanded to restore community, to resist injustice, and to meet the needs of my brothers.⁶

I want to suggest here that much of what was articulated and in-fact appropriated as the common good through the middle of the 20th century has been obscured at the least, and at worst has been lost and forgotten. Churches, perhaps as a reflection of society in general, seem today to have become more inwardly focused - religion and faith has become more privatized and insular. As a result, forms like ecumenism, interreligious and interfaith dialogue, and the capacity of the churches to critically engage culture and society have, in large measure, been diminished.

And so what might be some things to consider in a turn back toward common concern, and a common quest for common ground and the common good?

Imperative

⁶ Martin Luther King, Jr., “Loving Your Enemies,” *Strength to Love* (New York: York: Harper, 1963), pp. 41-50.

Howard Thurman and Martin Luther King, Jr. were among those who spoke to the divine and moral imperative – the calling - that Christians share in seeking common ground, the common good and beloved community. This imperative – this calling - is rooted and grounded in a divine commitment to advance the appropriation of the Christian love-ethic as foundational for constructively moving toward the realization of authentic community and common good. Thurman asserted that God’s intent is for the human family to live in community as interrelated members. Jesus came into the world to call persons back into community.

An imitation of the unconditional love revealed in the life and teachings of Jesus can be helpful in the quest for common ground and common good. Moving toward a deeper sense of who we are as individuals and community will enable us to live more shalom-filled lives, modeled on the life of Christ. There is the obligation to treat every person as Christ Himself, respecting her/his life as if it were the life of Christ.

Inspiration

In *Jesus and the Disinherited*, Howard Thurman asserted that Jesus was acutely aware of the cultural context of his ministry.⁷ Jesus knew that his teachings regarding God’s justice, love, mercy, forgiveness and peace would cause controversy and get him into trouble. Yet, he remained faithful to his mission, and sought to perpetually live the God-inspired message that he had been given.

For the church, the appropriation of community as a transformational Christ-centered, Spirit-filled process needs to be understood within the context of God’s ongoing work in salvation history. The development of common ground for the common good thus requires God-connectedness through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

Like Christ, it has been suggested that Howard Thurman was a “God intoxicated man,” and as such offered a paradigm of God-centered and God-inspired ministry. Perhaps, it is the case today that Christians are beckoned to live likewise in a God-intoxicated way, as we seek to bring about the common good among us.

⁷ Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1976), pp. 11-35.

Integration

The quest of common ground and the common good is at the heart of the church's ministry. The church, the community of those who confess Christ as Lord, is an embodiment of community – and common good within history. For this reason, the church is called must model community and must help the world to achieve common ground, while believing that unity among human beings is possible –and community is fully evident - only if there is real justice for all.

A commitment to the realization of the common good offers real hope for the world in which we live. Community – common ground – by its very nature - is integrative. Authentic community includes persons of different races, sexes, ages, religions, cultures, viewpoints, lifestyles, and stages of development - and serves to integrate them into a whole that is greater – more actualized and dynamic – than the sum of its parts. Forms of disintegration and disunity are, therefore, to be understood as antithetical to the common good, and to the will of God.

I appreciate that Jim Wallis concludes his provocative work on the common good by pointing us toward grace – and in-fact the amazing grace of God. It is my sense that this quest, this striving for common good, as it is to be realized, must be filled with the grace of God. For as John Newton intimated in his great hymn, “Amazing Grace,” ... “Grace has brought us safe thus far, and grace shall lead us on.”

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