ARTICLES

JUSTICE, NOT CHARITY: SOCIAL WORK THROUGH THE EYES OF FAITH

Nicholas Wolterstorff

This article argues that justice should be the basic category for those who look at social work through the eyes of faith. After developing the definition of justice, the article briefly explores how taking justice as the basic category will differ from taking obligation, love, or freedom as the basic category. The article examines some implications of this perspective for social workers.

I: What is the Charter of Christian Social Work?

FROM NEAR THE BEGINNINGS OF CHRISTIANITY, THE SPEECH OF JESUS in Matthew 25 about the Great Assize, as it was traditionally called, has been seen as the grand charter of Christian social work.

Though I'm sure the passage is familiar to all of you, let me refresh your memory by reading it, using the translation of the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV). It is my judgment that at two crucial junctures, the NRSV mistranslates the Greek; but let me get to that later and read the translation as it is. You might well ask why I use the NRSV translation if I judge that it is a mistranslation. My answer is that every other translation currently available mistranslates the Greek at the same two points.

> When the Son of Man comes in all his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say

Social Work & Christianity, Vol. 33, No. 2 (2006), 123-140
Journal of the North American Association of Christians in Social Work

> to those at his right hand, "Come, you that that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world, for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." Then he will say to those at his left hand, "You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me." Then they also will answer, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?" Then he will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me." And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life. (Matthew 25: 31-46)

I share the view that this passage can be seen as the grand charter of Christian social work—provided that it is rightly interpreted. English-speaking people of the modern world, however, almost always misinterpret it. They interpret Jesus as talking about charity, and they understand charity to be pitted against justice. They understand Jesus to be saying that in practicing charity toward the unfortunates of society, we are treating Jesus himself with charity. I find it beyond reasonable doubt that the passage is not about charity, but about justice. Jesus is saying that to fail to treat the naked, the hungry, the imprisoned, and so forth with justice is to wrong Jesus himself.

The context within which those who heard Jesus would have interpreted his words was, of course, the Hebrew Scriptures. So let me begin my argument for how the passage should be interpreted there. The writers of the Old Testament speak often about justice. And, as many commentators have noted, one of the most striking features of their talk about justice is that the presence or absence of justice in society is regularly connected with the fate of the widows, the orphans, the aliens, and the poor. Some or all of the members of this quartet regularly get special attention when justice, *mishpat*, is under consideration in the presentation of the original legal code, in the accusations by the prophets of violations of the code, and in the complaints of the psalmist about violations.

The Quartet of the Downtrodden and Excluded

There is nothing remotely like this mantra of the widows, the orphans, the sojourners, and the impoverished in John Locke's discussion of justice in his *Second Treatise*. The sort of justice that preoccupied Locke was the violation of a person's rightful liberty. For Locke, there was no differentiation in the rightful liberty of a person, no matter what sort of person that he or she might be. Nor is there anything remotely like this mantra in the discussions of justice by Plato and Aristotle, or in that by Kant.

Let me cite just a few passages from the many that could be found in the Old Testament. In Deuteronomy 24:17 Moses enjoins the people, "You shall not deprive a resident alien or an orphan of justice; you shall not take a widow's garment in pledge." In Deuteronomy 27:19 the priests call out, in a ritualized cursing ceremony, "Cursed be anyone who deprives the alien, the orphan, and the widow of justice"; to which the people say, "Amen." In Isaiah 1:17, the prophet says

> Seek justice,
> rescue the oppressed,
> defend the orphan,
> plead for the widow.

And in 10:1-2 he excoriates those

> who make iniquitous decrees,
> who write oppressive statutes,
> to turn aside the needy from justice,
> and to rob the poor of my people of their right,

that widows may be your spoil,
and that you may make the orphans your prey!

The widows, the orphans, the resident aliens, and the impoverished were the *bottom ones* in Israelite society, the *low ones*. That is how Israel's writers spoke of them. Whereas you and I tend to use the metaphor of a circle and to speak of such people as outsiders or on the periphery, Israel's writers gravitated toward the metaphor of up and down. These people are at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Israel's writers regularly describe rendering justice to them as "lifting them up." Given their position at the bottom of the social hierarchy, they were especially vulnerable to being treated with injustice—vulnerable to being "downtrodden," as our older English translations have it, vulnerable to be excluded from community. They were *the quartet of the downtrodden and the excluded.*

The Aim of Justice

A question we all want to ask is why Israel's writers placed so much emphasis on the downtrodden and the excluded when talking about justice. You will find a number of explanations in the literature—as indeed you will find attempts by some writers to overlook or deny that there is any such emphasis. On this occasion I will have to forego engaging the alternative explanations and simply present my own.

Israel's writers were not indifferent to attacks on the person and property of well-to-do persons and those who enjoyed social esteem; I could cite a number of passages to this effect. So that is not the explanation. Rather, it is the following. It is a truism that for any society whatsoever, those with the least social power and esteem are the most vulnerable to injustice, and hence the ones most likely actually to be suffering the most grievous forms of injustice. The basic reason for that is the following. Robbery and assault are *events* or *episodes* in the lives of the wealthy or empowered. If the robbery is of a wealthy person, the robbery is an episode in a life that otherwise is usually going quite nicely. By contrast, it is probable that the *daily condition* of those without power and esteem is unjust. Widows are also victims of burglary and assault; episodes of injustice often occur in their lives too. But in addition to such episodes, the *condition of their daily existence* is all-too-often unjust. Injustice pervades their lives in a way that it typically does not for those at the social top.

Now add to this realization the aim or concern underlying discussions of justice and injustice in the Old Testament. These discussions occur in the context of a variety of different aims and concerns. One's aim in conducting such a discussion might be to set forth the basic social structure of a fully just society. Or it might be to discover the social and psychological causes of one and another kind of injustice in some actual society. Neither of these theoretical aims would require special attention to the plight of the vulnerable low ones in society.

But suppose that one's aim is the practical aim of advancing the cause of justice in one's society. Suppose the context of one's discussion is the struggle against injustice. Then one has to make priority judgments. One has to decide where the greatest injustices and greatest vulnerabilities lie in society and focus attention there. I suggest that it was because the orientation of Israel's writers was practical rather than theoretical that the quartet of the downtrodden and excluded ones looms so large in their writings. What they say about justice and injustice occurs within the context of an imperative that they had heard from Yahweh and that they then announced to their fellows: seek justice, undo the bonds of injustice. Israel's religion was a religion of salvation, not of contemplation—that is what accounts for the mantra of the widows, the orphans, the aliens, and the poor. It was not, be it noted, a religion of salvation *from this earthly existence,* but a religion of salvation *from injustice* in this earthly existence.

The Aim of Jesus to Do Justice

Now look once again at the passage on the Great Assize with which I began. Jesus speaks in the passage of being hungry, thirsty, naked, a stranger, sick, and imprisoned. It is of course the impoverished who are typically hungry, thirsty, and naked. So we can condense the list to the poor, the alien, the sick, and the imprisoned. It's hard not to see this as a variation on the Old Testament quartet of the downtrodden and excluded. The only item that might raise a question in one's mind is the sick. Everybody, it may be said, gets sick. Yes indeed. But not all who are sick get no visitors. The sick Jesus has in mind are the lonely sick, the forgotten sick.

Now let me bring another well-known New Testament passage into the picture. Shortly after he began teaching and preaching in public, Jesus attended the local synagogue on a Sabbath and was

invited to read from scripture and comment on what he read. "The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him," says Luke who tells the story. "He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written":

> The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
> because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.
> He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
> and recovery of sight to the blind,
> to let the oppressed go free,
> to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

Jesus then "rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down." "The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him," says Luke, expecting him to say something. What Jesus then said is that "today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:17-21).

What are we to make of this self-identification? Well, the first thing to note is that in his report of what transpired in the synagogue, Luke conflated two Old Testament passages, one from Isaiah 58 and one from Isaiah 61. The former speaks of God's demand for justice:

> Is this not the fast that I choose:
> to loose the bonds of injustice,
> to undo the thongs of the yoke,
> to let the oppressed go free,
> and to break every yoke?
> Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
> and bring the homeless poor into your house;
> when you see the naked, to cover them,
> and not to hide yourself from your own kin?
> (Isaiah 58:6-7).

The latter passage promises the deliverance and restoration of God's people by the anointed one:

> The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me,
> because the Lord has anointed me:
> he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
> to bind up the brokenhearted,
> to proclaim liberty to the captives,

and release to the prisoners;
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor,
and the day of vengeance of our God. . . .
(Isaiah 61:1-2)

The import is unmistakable. Jesus identified himself in the synagogue as God's anointed one, the Messiah, whose vocation it is to proclaim good news to the poor, the blind, the imprisoned, the oppressed—in short, whose vocation it is to proclaim that justice for the downtrodden and the excluded is on the way. Isaiah's examples of the downtrodden and the excluded are somewhat different from the standard Old Testament examples of widows, orphans, aliens, and the poor, just as Jesus' examples in the speech about the Great Assize are somewhat different. But there can be no doubt that the examples in each case are illustrations of those who are typically downtrodden and excluded. And there can be no doubt that the Old Testament writers and Jesus regarded the lifting up of the downtrodden and the incorporation of the excluded as the first priority in the undoing of injustice and the bringing of justice.

Righteousness or Justice?

We are now at a place in our discussion where I can point to the mistranslation in the NRSV translation of Jesus' speech about the Great Assize. Let me say, once again, that the NRSV is not peculiar in this regard; to the best of my knowledge, every English translation that is currently available in bookstores mistranslates the Greek in the same way. I am not "picking on" the NRSV; overall, I judge it to be the best of our contemporary English translations.

Jesus addresses those at his right hand and says that they fed him when he was hungry, gave him something to drink when he was thirsty, and so forth. What the NRSV calls "the righteous" then ask, when did we do this? And the entire passage concludes with the statement that those on the Lord's left hand will go away into eternal punishment whereas "the righteous" will enter eternal life. My contention is that the English word "righteous," twice occurring, is a mistranslation of the Greek. The Greek word is the adjective *dikaios*. In both cases, the Greek adjective *dikaios* should have been translated with our adjective *just*. It is the *just* who ask when they did what Jesus says they did; it is the *just* who will enjoy eternal life. The just receive this reward for they did exactly what

Jesus and the Old Testament say justice requires; they sought to undo the condition of the downtrodden and the excluded.

I am assuming that justice and righteousness are not the same thing, and that to be just and to be righteous are not the same. Righteousness is a personal character trait; justice is a normative social condition. The righteous person is the one who has the personal character trait of righteousness. The just person is the one who struggles to bring about that normative social condition which is justice. I concede that the Greek word *dikaios*, in the linguistic milieu of the New Testament, could be used to mean either what our word "righteous" means or what our word "just" means; it was ambiguous in that regard. I should add at once, however, that our word "righteous" acquired negative connotations somewhere along the line, and those connotations would not have been part of what was meant by *dikaios*. Our modern English word "upright" comes closer to catching the meaning of *dikaios* than our word "righteous."

In any case, since *dikaios* could mean either *upright* or *just*, context has to determine how we translate its occurrences in the New Testament. Given the context that I have presented to you, there can be no doubt that Jesus in Matthew 25 is talking about justice, not about justice-blind or justice-transcending charity. The story of the Great Assize is not about charity but about justice. Jesus is not saying that in treating his downtrodden and excluded brothers and sisters with charity, we treat him with charity; he is saying that in rendering justice to them we render justice to him, and that in treating them unjustly we treat him unjustly. Jesus calls these people the "least." To wrong the social least is to wrong Jesus himself.

Justice or Charity?

I began by saying that the Matthean passage about the Great Assize has long been taken as the grand charter of Christian social work. I said I agreed with that tradition, provided the passage is rightly interpreted. The passage, so I have now argued, is about justice. It says that to alleviate the condition of the social least is to render them what justice requires. It is not to go beyond justice into the realm of charity and benevolence; it is to render to them what justice requires. To fail to come to their aid is not simply to fail in charity or to be less than fully righteous. It is to wrong them. And the passage gives a truly awesome significance to wronging

them: to wrong the social least is, whether one realizes it or not, to wrong Jesus Christ himself.

To take this passage as the grand charter of Christian social work is thus to take justice as the fundamental category for such work. Not everybody that the contemporary social worker deals with fits under the categories of the downtrodden and the excluded. Some are victims of natural disasters, some are victims of disease, and so forth. Perhaps not all the poor that Jesus and the biblical writers spoke of were downtrodden. Some may have been the victims of natural disasters. This inclusion, however, does not cloud the issue. The fundamental question that the social worker asks in each case is: what does justice require?

II: The Rights of Creatures Made in the Image of God

What is justice? On this occasion I must be extremely brief in my answer to this question. Everything I say could be developed at length and in detail, and are, in fact, developed at considerable length and in considerable detail in the book I have just finished, which I call simply *Justice*.

My impression is that most Americans today, when they hear of justice, think of *meting out* justice. They think of retributive justice. A good rule of thumb for listening to our politicians is that if the politician is talking about justice, assume that he or she is talking about prisons. Some Americans, when they hear about justice, think a bit more broadly than this; they think about the justice system in general. They think not only of meting out justice, but also of what precedes that, namely, rendering justice in cases of conflict and determining whether an accused is guilty of the accusation.

To equate justice in general with either meting out justice or with rendering judgment is a serious mistake, however. Meting out justice and rendering judgment deal with what justice requires when injustice has occurred or when someone charges that it has occurred. But if meting out justice and rendering judgment become relevant when injustice has occurred or is said to have occurred, then there has to be another kind of justice and injustice than that of meting out justice and rendering judgment. There has to be that kind of justice which has been violated or is said to have been violated. There has to be that kind of justice which has broken down or is said to have broken down. Call that kind of justice 'primary justice'. Only when primary justice has broken down or is said to

have broken down do rendering judgment and meting out justice enter the picture.

Primary Justice Involves Rights

What I am calling *primary* justice is often called *social* justice. My reason for calling it *primary* is not that I am against calling it social—not at all—but to highlight the fact that this kind of justice is basic. Unless there were this kind of justice, there could not be the kind of justice that apparently most people think about most of the time, namely, retributive justice.

When I said that justice is the fundamental category for Christians in social work, what I had in mind was not only corrective or retributive justice, but justice in general: primary and corrective justice. The social worker will of course attend to the ways in which her clients are the victims both of crime and of the criminal justice system. But she also will go beyond that and seek to render to them primary justice.

And what, in general, do I take justice to be? Justice has to do with rights. Justice is present in social relationships insofar as people are enjoying what they have a right to. The dark side of enjoying that to which one has a right is being wronged; to be wronged is to be deprived of that to which one has a right. Thus we could also say that justice is present in social relationships when no one is wronged. You may recall my paraphrase of what Jesus says in the Great Assize speech: to wrong the social least is to wrong Jesus himself.

In my view, a 'right' is always a right to be treated a certain way by one's fellows—or in the limiting case, by oneself. That's why I said earlier that, in distinction from righteousness (which is a personal character trait), justice is a normative social relationship. It is further my view that one's right to be treated a certain way by one's fellows is grounded in what respect for one's worth requires: if respect for my worth requires that I be treated in such-and-such a way by my fellows, then I have a right to such treatment.

Rights have been getting a bad press in recent years from both Christians and others. Rights-talk, so it is said, reflects a self-centered, possessive, individualistic picture of society in which everybody is always talking about what he or she is entitled to rather than about what they ought to be doing and what the loving thing to do would be. I well remember a dear friend of mine standing up

after a talk I had given in favor of rights and, with quivering voice, saying, "Nick, nobody is entitled to anything; it's all grace!"

But that is mistaken. I acknowledge that rights-talk can be abused and often is abused, but name me the kind of talk that is not abused. The battered wife is abused by the love-talk of those who say she should accept her abuse out of love for her husband; benevolence-talk was abused by the Afrikaners who talked of the benevolence they showered on the workers living in huts in their backyards.

The 'other' comes into my presence bearing claims on how I treat him, and I come into his presence bearing claims on how he treats me for we are both creatures of worth. Rights-talk is for talking about that reality.

Creatures of Worth, Made in the Image of God

And let there be no doubt that we are creatures of worth, all of us. We have been made in the image of God. The psalmist can scarcely contain himself when he thinks about the exalted status that this gives us. Convinced that we human beings have been singled out from all other earthlings for divine attentiveness and love, he asks, "Who are we, that God is thus mindful of us?" The passage is often interpreted as if the psalmist's answer to his question were, "We're nothing, we're worthless, just dirt and dust." That is not the psalmist's answer. His answer is that we are created just a bit lower in the cosmic scale of worth than divine beings, or angels (Psalm 8). The theme is picked up by Jesus at various points in the gospels when he speaks of human worth. "Consider the ravens," Luke reports him as saying, "they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds!"

III: Rights and Duties Rather Than Freedom

My discussion thus far is in-house. I have argued that justice rather than charity should be the basic category of the Christian in social work. But of course the main alternative perspectives that you face in doing social work are not alternative Christian perspectives but secular perspectives. I have decided on this occasion to focus on how social work looks through the eyes of faith rather than on how it does *not* look. If I were to analyze the secular alternatives,

what I would argue is that almost all of them, so far as I can tell, operate in one way or another with the ideal of freedom. The goal is liberation, empowerment. I have just read a wonderful book by Joseph E. Davis, *Accounts of Innocence: Sexual Abuse, Trauma, and the Self* (2005). In the book Davis tracks the emergence of the diagnosis of the sexually abused person as the innocent victim of a trauma, with one of the goals of treatment being to get them to accept this narrative of what happened to them. Here is part of what he says in his summary:

> According to the plot of the mediating narrative as it has unfolded in the victim account and survivor story, the pathological secret has been identified, and its effects progressively overcome. The hold of the past on the client has been broken; she has been freed from who she was, freed from the wrong story, freed from encumbering relationships, and has the power to become someone new. (p. 207)

My difficulty with all accounts that take freedom as the basic category is that there are some things that a given person should be freed from and some that he or she should not be freed from, and some things that a given person should be free to do and some that he or she should not be free to do. Thus, freedom and empowerment, though they are often exceedingly important, cannot be basic. Rights and duties, justice and obligation—these are basic.

IV: Focusing on the Worth of the Other

What difference does it make whether the social worker employs rendering justice as the basic category for understanding and directing what she does, rather than, say, the category of carrying out her obligations, or the category of bestowing charity? Employing the category of rendering justice places the worth of the other in the forefront of one's attention. It alerts one to that worth, and to what respect for that worth requires of one. Thereby it also alerts one to violations of that worth, to the wronging of the other. What I have in mind here by 'worth' includes not only the worth we have *qua* human beings—the worth the psalmist and Jesus were speaking about—but also the particular worth we each have: the worth of accomplishment, the worth of character, and so forth.

When thinking of what one is doing in terms of carrying out one's obligations, one does not focus on the worth of the other. One focuses on oneself, the agent, not on the object of one's agency. One focuses on one's own rectitude or guilt, not on whether the object of one's agency is being wronged. And depending on how one thinks of obligation and responsibility, this can be an exceedingly impersonal way of thinking. All too often in the Christian tradition it has been impersonal—especially, I would say, in my own tradition, the Reformed or Calvinist tradition. Responsibility is conceived in terms of conformity to law. One's attention is focused on whether one's own actions and those of others conform to law. That a person or human being has been wronged falls out of view.

When we employ the category of love or charity for understanding and guiding what we are doing we likewise do not focus on the worth of the other—not, at least, if it is the justice-blind love that is regularly recommended by theologians as *agape* rather than the justice-alert love of which, so it seems to me, Scripture speaks. Justice-blind love, agape, thinks not in terms of the worth of the other but in terms of her well-being. It seeks to enhance her well-being. All too often such love or charity comes across as smothering; not infrequently, as oppressive and demeaning.

If I think only in terms of enhancing your well-being and not at all in terms of what respect for your worth requires of me, then I will see myself as justified in imposing all sorts of hard treatment on you provided I think such treatment has the potential of greatly enhancing your well-being. I will torture you if I think torture is likely to save you from hell-fire. One can understand why Hannah Arendt remarked that the problem with Christians in politics is that they love too much. Further, if I see myself as treating you with love, charity, benevolence, rather than with justice, it is not unlikely that I will also think of myself as morally superior, and will expect gratitude for my generosity. It happens all the time.

Do not misunderstand. I am not saying that the category of doing what one ought to do is irrelevant for the social worker, nor am I saying that the category of charity is irrelevant. I am asserting that the categories of responsibility and of charity, when employed without attentiveness to justice, all too often produce distorted, oppressive, and offensive ways of acting. Attentiveness to justice and injustice means attentiveness to the worth of the other and to all the ways in which the other can be wronged. What makes

such attentiveness especially important for the social worker is the discrepancy of power typically present in the situation. It is easy for the social worker to wrong in new ways the already wronged and suffering person.

V: Victims of Injustice Rather Than Unfortunates

Those who insist on thinking of social work in terms of bestowing charity rather than rendering justice will also insist on describing the clientele of the social worker as *unfortunates*; to describe them as downtrodden and excluded would be to think of them as victims of injustice, and thus to give the game away. As I mentioned earlier, some of them are indeed unfortunates. While some are not victims of social oppression or exclusion, they have been assaulted by natural disasters or disease. So let it be conceded that some of the clientele of the modern social worker are unfortunates. Though to fail to make available to them what they need for a decent existence is a rupture in justice, not merely a shortfall in charity, that which makes them needy is not itself a case of injustice. Nonetheless, a striking feature of the biblical writers and of Jesus is how little inclined they are to use the category of the unfortunates when thinking about the needy of the world, and how powerfully inclined they are to use the category of the downtrodden. In their eyes, the needy of the world are in great measure victims of injustice.

Thus justice and injustice operate on two levels in the thought of Jesus and the biblical writers. What I have been arguing up to this point is that Jesus and the biblical writers do not think of rendering assistance to the needy of the world in terms of charity but in terms of justice. What I am now saying is that they do not primarily think of the needy of the world as unfortunates but as victims of injustice.

The implications are as unsettling as they are clear. If it is unfortunates that one is dealing with, one simply treats the victims as justice requires of one. Or in those cases in which technology holds out some promise of forestalling similar unfortunate episodes, one both treats the victims as justice requires of one and promotes the technology. But if one is dealing with victims of injustice, then treating the victims as justice requires itself requires that one do what one can to eliminate the unjust treatment. Hence it is that the

passage in Isaiah which Jesus read or referred to spoke not only of sharing one's bread with the hungry, bringing the homeless poor into one's house, and clothing the naked, but also of loosing the bonds of injustice, undoing the thongs of the yoke, letting the oppressed go free, and breaking every yoke. One not only tends to the victims of injustice but looses the bonds that make them victims.

Attacking Victimizers as Well as Aiding Victims

I trust that I do not have to belabor the implications. Christians in social work will see their task as going beyond aiding the victims of misfortune and injustice to struggling to loosen the bonds of injustice. Rendering justice to the victims of injustice requires going beyond aiding victims; it requires attacking the victimizers—be they individual persons, social organizations and institutions, or whatever. Whether or not one wants to call the struggle against injustice *social work* or something else is of course a purely linguistic matter. In any case, Christians in social work should not only alleviate the distress of the downtrodden, but become their advocates against those who oppress them. Of course the entire Christian community is called to join them in this, but I do think that you who are social workers are peculiarly able, by virtue of your work, to inform, guide, and inspire the rest of us.

VI: The Almost Impossible Position of the Christian Social Worker

I recognize that if what I have been saying is correct, then many Christian social workers will find themselves in an almost impossible situation—and not only Christians in social work but other social workers as well. It appears to me that a good many supporters of so-called *faith-based initiatives* on the part of the federal government are hostile to the employment of social workers by the government. Perhaps the hostility of some is due entirely to the fact that, in their judgment, government does a poor job of social work, while other organizations, in particular faith-based organizations, do a much better job. But it appears to me that there are others for whom that is not the source of their hostility. Even if the government did a better job of social work than any other organization or institution, they would still be opposed to government-sponsored social work. Their reason, so far as I can tell,

is invariably that social work as they see it consists of bestowing charity rather than of rendering justice. They see government as having no business bestowing charity on people. In their opinion, taxing people to bestow charity is, they say, flat wrong. The business of government is justice.

I am in near agreement with that last point, that the business of government is justice—though I feel compelled to add that those who argue in the way I have indicated often seem to have no difficulty whatsoever with the government bestowing charity on the powerful and the wealthy. I do think that government is sometimes entitled to go beyond justice and regulate the life of the citizenry in such a way as to enhance the common good. That exception aside, I agree that the fundamental business of government is justice.

I trust I have said enough, however, to show that the remainder of this argument is flatly unbiblical. The argument turns a blind eye to some of the most fundamental themes in Christian scripture. Social work is not bestowing charity. Social work is rendering justice. It belongs, thus, to the business of government. It does not follow, indeed, that government must itself be the institution that sponsors social work. The argument does require that government must see to it that social work gets done. How it best gets done will differ from time to time and place to place. Here in the United States, the judgment has been that a mix of institutions is best. A good deal of social work in this country is sponsored by the government at one level or another and much of it, possibly most of it, is done by non-governmental agencies.

Can You Challenge the System While Under Its Employ?

And now I can highlight what I called the "almost impossible situation" of the Christian social worker. The Christian social worker, I said, will not be content to come to the aim of victims of injustice but will also struggle to loosen the bonds of injustice and give guidance to the rest of us in behaving and thinking similarly. Unfortunately, the government well seldom be pleased to have its employees speaking out against injustice, unless, of course, it be injustice off in the distance somewhere in Nepal, Uzbekistan, and the like. The government strongly prefers that its employees shut up unless what they say fits with government policy.

My view of the situation is in fact somewhat more cynical than what I have just said would indicate. I think a good deal of what the

government wants out of its social workers is that they will contain the discontent that arises over the injustice of government policies. The Bush administration has not concealed the fact that its tax policies have heavily favored the very rich, that they have shifted the tax burden to the middle and lower classes, and that the number of U.S. citizens living below the poverty line has increased over the past five years. The only official defense it offers for its tax policies is that they, when combined with the administration's spend-and-borrow policy, are necessary for "growing the economy." It should be obvious to all that the administration's tax policies really have nothing whatsoever to do with the state of economy. No matter what the economy does, whether it grows, declines, or remains steady, a tax policy that favors the rich will remain in place.

The big danger involved in advancing such a policy in a democracy is of course that the non-rich, and in particular the poor, will rebel. The unspoken task assigned to the social worker is to insure that that does not happen.

VII: Christians in Social Work Stand at the Near End of a Long Tradition

I want to close by calling attention to something of great importance that I have not done today and that I lack the competence to do. My discussion of social work through the eyes of faith has been entirely synchronic. I have said nothing about the long venerable tradition of Christian social work. And let there be no doubt that it is a long venerable tradition, going back to late antiquity when Christians acquired a reputation for their aid to the poor, through the middle ages when the bishops were responsible for the poor, on into early modern times when orphanages were founded in many European cities, into the nineteenth century when Christians were active in abolition and when the Salvation Army was founded. I have been told by some of you that present-day textbooks on the history of social work pretend that there was no tradition of Christian social work, and locate the beginnings of social work with some secular activists in the 1820s and 1830s. I find this secular bowdlerizing of the history of social work academically irresponsible and morally reprehensible.

One of the most important contributions that the historians among us can make to Christians in social work is telling the

story accurately, and as part of that accurate telling, recovering the memory of the tradition of Christian social work. You who are Christians in social work today may sometimes feel that Christian reflections on social work are only beginning. What that story would show is that, far from that being the case, you stand at the near end of a long and rich tradition. Knowing that tradition could not fail to inform, inspire, and encourage all of us in our attempt to uncover and describe how social work looks when seen through the eyes of faith. ❖

References

Davis, J. E. (2005). *Accounts of innocence: Sexual abuse, trauma, and the self*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

***Nicholas Wolterstorff**, Ph.D., Noah Porter Professor Emeritus of Philosophical Theology, Yale University; Senior Fellow, Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture, University of Virginia. 58 Sunnybrook SE, Grand Rapids, MI 49506. Email: Nicholas.wolterstorff@yale.edu. Phone: (616) 458-9888.*

Key Words: Justice, Social Work, Rights, Spirituality and Religion

Editor's Note

This article is an edited version of the Alan Keith-Lucas Lecture delivered at the annual Convention and Training Conference of the North American Association of Christians in Social Work, Grand Rapids, MI, October 28, 2005.