

A Theological Approach to Social Reform, Advocacy and Engagement¹



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The thesis of this book is that social reform, advocacy, and political engagement are valid Christian expressions of love for our neighbour, and are important and necessary for the good of our neighbours. However, not all Christians feel willing or able to engage in such activity. Why is this so? In this chapter, I want to give a theological account of why I consider such action to be warranted, and to address some of the internal roadblocks that Christians experience in this area.

It might be worth pausing to comment on a tension that some readers will know and feel – particularly those with a Protestant background. I come from a conservative evangelical perspective, a view characterised by an emphasis upon biblical preaching and evangelism, and – in my part of the world – a reticence to say much about social reform. Over the years, I’ve noticed a mutual irritation, a ‘scratchiness’, between those interested in social justice and those in my own ‘camp’.

Here I will risk a thumbnail view of what put us in this situation. The tension has nineteenth-century roots in the Anglo-speaking world, when theological liberalism laid claim to moral action as authentic spirituality while theological conservatism differentiated itself through an emphasis upon orthodox and biblically shaped

theology. Over time, these camps borrowed from Marxist and capitalist ideologies for their respective accounts of society. However, neither ideology offers an authentically Christian account of humanity or society, and theological oddities on both sides of this sociological ‘divide’ have become apparent over time.

Endless conservative discussions of ‘the relationship between social justice and evangelism’ often seemed clumsy, even weird, alongside the easy-going seamlessness of the biblical authors’ love of Jesus’ saving work and their love for the poor. Paul won’t change his allegiance to Jesus Christ for anyone: ‘I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord’ (Philippians 3:8). However, this allegiance entails care for the poor, as when the other apostles ‘asked only one thing’ of Paul and his group: ‘that we remember the poor, which was actually what I was eager to do’ (Galatians 2:10). There is no dichotomy here.

On the other hand, facile and manipulative calls for revolution or wealth redistribution often seemed to ignore the Bible’s deep analysis of the human spiritual condition – an alienation from God and from each other, which requires Christ’s atonement, the Father’s forgiveness, and Holy Spirit-driven change. Any short-term gains made by dumping this ancient account of human existence will be overwhelmed by long-term losses.

Can we leave this tension behind us? This old fight is already old news for many Christians: those with a conservative evangelical sensibility are fighting for the good of the neighbour as a reflex, while others with a social justice sensibility are recognising when dark forces require divine spiritual intervention and rescue. Christians from both ‘camps’ need each other, because each knows a thing or two from the Bible.

Roadblock 1: It has a lot to do with the way we feel

What, then, prevents those Christians who do not engage in social reform, advocacy, and political engagement? My answer will begin in an unexpected place: it has a lot to do with the way we *feel*.

There is a frailty to being human that emerges in many ways. We may have so many other responsibilities that it seems impossibly burdensome to think about the world's poor. A Western epidemic of depression touches many of us with an experience of 'the pit' (Psalm 88), driving us away from others and particularly from those far away. An absence of knowledge about the world's poor may stunt our affection towards them. Or worse, too much shallow knowledge of the world's poor may have overwhelmed us with feelings of despair and hopelessness about taking action.

We carry some experiences of frailty to the grave, and God still loves us. However, God does not call us to remain in places like these. The normal Christian journey sees our affections growing beyond ourselves, both towards others and towards God.

So I want to begin by looking at the Christians of ancient Macedonia. They feel some way that we often do not. Yet if we don't have what they have, the rest of this book cannot help us. If we do not *feel* the way the Macedonians did, we will not engage with the needs of our neighbours, because we cannot.

That claim may initially sound frightening and disempowering, because in the modern West we have come to believe that we have no control over our feelings. But that is only half true, and the Bible paints a different story. When we direct our gaze differently and when God helps us in our helplessness, an inexorable upheaval follows in the contours of our feeling-world.

What can we learn from Macedonia?

Estimates vary, but at the time of the apostle Paul's letter to the Corinthians, it is about thirty years after Jesus has left the earthly scene. News of him has spread like a grassfire around the Mediterranean coast, and dozens of Christian groups are springing up. Paul visits many of these groups, and he becomes aware of major wealth differences between them. He develops an ongoing collection to help some of those who are struggling.

Paul plans to invite the Corinthians to contribute, as they have

in the past. However, in his letter he also talks about how the Macedonians, city-dwellers in the neighbouring region of Achaia, have reacted to the collection.

Frankly, they were absurd. 'During a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity' (2 Corinthians 8:2). How can severe affliction leave them *any* joy, let alone an 'abundance' of it? How can 'extreme poverty' add together with 'abundant joy' to give an overflowing 'wealth of generosity'?

Some of us see such wealth occasionally. An aid worker travels to a bare and remote village. They are greeted with joy, and in the alchemy of joy a feast appears out of nothing and nowhere. Such people seem to know and feel something we do not. Westerners are usually rocked to the core.

I will not enact a typical guilt-trip at this point, where I point to those poor villagers and Macedonians, marvel at their generosity, then moan about our comparative wealth and stinginess. This kind of a kicking is easy but pointless, for it doesn't unlock the secret of Macedonian joy. Why *don't* the Macedonians feel hopeless and useless, as we so often do? Can the basis of their hope and joy be transmitted to Australians?

I find that when I read 2 Corinthians chapters 8–9, my heart feels somehow fuller. I've tried to understand how and why this occurs, and I want to share something of what I think I've discovered. Some of these theological discoveries may help remove our roadblocks to engagement.

Community-sustaining abundance

When someone mentions a collection, we usually feel tense: what about my family and future? We then tend to condemn that reaction as selfish, but Paul doesn't. He reassures the Corinthians that 'I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you,' and then goes in another direction:

It is a question a fair balance between your present abundance and their

need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance. As it is written, 'The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little.' (2 Corinthians 8:13–15)

These words assume that the created order and its social and economic activity are able to operate as a system of *community-sustaining abundance*. In this view of the world, humans are designed to be for each other, and resources are always sufficient to enable us to live this way.

As Jesus once said, 'one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions' (Luke 12:15). His word has almost become a worn-out cliché, but only because we participate in a society that refuses to agree with Jesus and whose polity acts as if individual possession is the highest expression of human existence. Jesus' powerful insight into the purpose of human being shows that if we think we are primarily an individual existing to consume and possess, we will never find ourselves. We can only understand who we are and what we are for when we see ourselves as part of the world's community-sustaining abundance. Consumption and possession are not evils in themselves. But in our acts of possession and consumption, we are each a *waypoint*, not an endpoint, designed to renew what we receive in order to pass something on to others. We consume and possess in order, finally, to share:

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The social use of goods cannot be constructed out of individual interest in things, so that something is originally 'mine' before it becomes 'ours,' the conception influentially christened 'possessive individualism.' This is just one more version of the attempt to conjure society out of individuality, laying hold of the self-sufficiency of God and the ungrounded character of creation and claiming them for human existence and self-foundation. Human community is not a product of human foundation; it is a condition of being human, a gift of God.²

In other words, you can't have joy and you won't engage if you have that faulty view of human being called 'possessive individualism'. Sharing in community is not an optional extra; it is embedded in who you are, and you will find joy when you grow into who you are meant to be. Later I will return to the implications of this view for society and politics, but for the moment, we will focus a little longer on how the Macedonians found joy by knowing community-sustaining abundance.

Paul's reference to 'fair balance' implies a basic equity between humans. It should be obvious without theology that each person is precious, but unfortunately this truth is often obscured. When the Bible describes every member of humanity as God's 'image' (Genesis 1:26), each person can be seen as precious despite their faults and failings. But the concept of 'equity' becomes ugly when drafted into fights over a small pie. If we are to honour equity, the concept of abundance becomes crucial.

Paul interweaves equity-talk and abundance-talk. We are often conscious of inequity when we have less. However, when we see the world as an arena of abundance waiting to be sustainably unlocked and shared, we really become free to do justice. Somehow, even in their poverty, that is how the Macedonians direct their gaze.

However to 'see the world as an arena of abundance' will seem to many today as exceedingly odd. 'Our economic system functions as a story about *scarcity*,' writes David Cunningham.³ Each economy is pictured as primarily a competition over scarce resources, and 'because we are in the *habit* of living according to the narrative of scarcity – this actually becomes the narrative that governs our lives.'⁴ In all our experiences of constant turmoil over unmet demands, unrealised opportunities, and unfulfilled dreams, we have internalised this story that scarcity is the problem.

There are certainly planetary, economic, and developing world problems that the story of scarcity seems to describe. Human demand *does* burden the planet at some points. The struggles of the developing world *can* sometimes rightly be described in terms of

exploitation by a rapacious West. But if this story of scarcity has a kernel of truth, it can be overstated in a way that fails to notice where the real problem lies. The planet is *finite*, but it remains capable of *abundance*, and ‘scarcity of resources’ is not the planet’s fault. ‘Scarcity’ is an artefact of how we choose to see and then act.

The apostle John gives a powerful and penetrating diagnostic of the psychology of scarcity when he writes that

the love of the Father is not in those who love the world; for all that is in the world – the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, the pride in riches – comes not from the Father but from the world. (1 John 2:15–16)

In the world-love that John opposes, the problem is located *behind* the eyeballs, not in front of them, in how we see and then act. John names three desires: ‘the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes’, and ‘pride in riches’ (which names our desire for social status). Humanity becomes deranged by desires for good things, and the ‘world’ according to John describes *the way humans thanklessly and voraciously misappropriate God’s good world*.

It is as if God has made his world ‘too good’. We attach to aspects of it too hard: hungrily, obsessively, and destructively. Yet ironically, despite the seeming permanence lent to our desires by this intensity, they are actually very fleeting or ‘passing’ (1 John 2:17). The tragedy of sin is that we are robbed of the ability to see what God wants to free us into. In an alternative story of fulfilment that opposes community-sustaining abundance, our passions and idolatries seem real, solid and compelling. But they are insubstantial, deceitful and transitory (cf. Hebrews 3:13, 11:24).⁵

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At a social level, what emerges is a kind of groupthink (in families, corporations and nations) that drives us to hoard and struggle to corner the earth’s abundant resources. When human fear and greed know no bounds, resources will always appear scarce, and where humans live in this distorted relationship of voracity toward the

planet, material consequences need to be addressed. Thankfully though, the planet is designed to be resilient and supportive of humanity, and it can continue to be so wherever humanity returns to thankful and humble respect for and use of its goods. (This logic underlies the powerful and important concept of ‘sustainability’.)

The Macedonians have plenty of right to think that ‘resources are scarce’. But they don’t. They simply think that they have lots, and see themselves as sharers. Paul even seems slightly haunted by the strange excess of their perception: ‘they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means, begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing’ in the collection (2 Corinthians 8:3–4).

Once the inherent abundance of the creation has come into view, Paul can bring another aspect of the created order into play. He uses a statement of ancient wisdom that pops up elsewhere in ancient literature. ‘The one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully’ (2 Corinthians 9:6). Here is a pattern that applies to crops in the first instance – the ancient agrarian version of a modern businessman’s dictum that ‘you have to spend money to make money’. However, the pattern also applies in human affairs. Parsimony generates parsimony, but abundance-thinking – and the feelings and actions that go with it – generates abundance and community.

I know an old woman who sums up this truth. Over the years, she has learnt to resist the whining, bitter, grasping tone that typifies our city. Even when she was poor, she practised hospitality. When a conversation turns to her, she turns it back to the other. Even when she is in pain, she reaches out to others. She is like a flower, and people come to her like bees. They want to be with her and to help her. She is so attractive that whether they realise it or not, they want to be like her. (This old woman is my mother. I sure want to be like her.)

Something stunningly beautiful happens when a whole community knows this pattern of abundance. Paul remembers such a moment in ancient Israel (2 Corinthians 8:15), when God rained bread *gratis*.

People were so safe in the knowledge of his abundance that ‘the one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little’ (see Exodus 16:18). Interestingly, the amounts possessed are not exactly equal. Even so, the abundance of God’s goodness sustains a deep sense of fairness.

We can be like that on a planet like this. To get in touch with community-sustaining abundance enables us to enjoy a pattern that sustains equity, and reduces our tension about our family and our future, even when the actual amounts we possess differ. Below I will say more about how this view affects our political engagements. First, more needs to be said about the wellspring of community-sustaining abundance.

The wellspring God

Abundance springs from the very heart and character of God. ‘He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing,’ says Paul (2 Corinthians 9:10). The planet is abundant because God, if we may say so reverently, is a lunatic. He does not stop giving and ‘richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment’ (1 Timothy 6:17). ‘Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights’ (James 1:17).

God, the ultimate spendthrift, sows in a way that triggers the abundance-pattern. ‘He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing.’ We’ve switched from literal seed to a metaphor, as this Giver generates people like him, who ‘will be enriched in every way’ for ‘great generosity’ (2 Corinthians 9:10–11). God’s excess triggers a cascade-effect in human affairs:

God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work. (2 Corinthians 9:8)

Ultimately, he is the source of the Macedonian madness. Paul speaks of ‘the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of

Macedonia' (2 Corinthians 8:1), where 'grace' is code for outlandish generosity.

The outwardness of grace

So gracious is this grace, that in Jesus Christ, God completely smashes the nexus between our personal performance and our acceptability to him, and declares the whole human moral marathon irrelevant to his love. The early Christians discovered this smashing of the nexus to their amazement. 'For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God,' as Paul puts it (2 Corinthians 5:21). This statement is among the Bible's least understood and most maligned verses – strangely so, because it is so profoundly liberating. When God in Christ takes our failures as if his own, and loves people with the same love he has for Christ, he builds the safest, freest community that is possible for a human to enjoy. At a stroke, God draws Jesus' people as close as possible. The implications of this ultra-grace are immediate:

you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich. (2 Corinthians 8:9)

Their reconciliation, love and acceptance are complete. No relationship can be richer, fuller, or safer.

The Macedonians revelled in this ultra-grace as the 'riches' of Jesus became their own. It 'rubbed off' on them, and became embedded in their settled habits of feeling and action that we call their 'virtues' and 'character'. Freed from the need to perform for God's love, they were freed to be rich toward their neighbour simply because their neighbour was precious to God. By God's forgiveness, they are freed from obsession about their own moral performance, and their gaze shifts to the preciousness and needs of their far-away neighbour. The Macedonians lived in the 'outwardness' of grace.

The irresistible future

Paul quotes an old text (Psalm 112:9) to reiterate God's uncontrollable

generosity: 'He scatters abroad, he gives to the poor' (2 Corinthians 9:9). But tellingly, this text continues with an eye on the long future: 'his righteousness endures forever.' In the imagination of these early Christians, the world's end *gave them back* the present, and enabled them to live well in it. They thought of world's end as 'a new earth, where righteousness is at home' (2 Peter 3:13), and looked forward to a time and place where justice reigns supreme, and where wrongs are satisfyingly righted. They saw themselves as the advance party. They wanted to begin now.

It followed that there was no point in them giving themselves to a regime of fearful acquisition, which has no future. God's righteousness is what endures forever, and we already know that it takes the form of abundant giving to the poor. Every pauper needs Christ's riches, and those made rich share their abundance with other poor. This is the irresistible future, and the only future worth living towards.

The subservience of commands

No arid Christian ethic constructed out of commands and duties is anywhere in sight here. Paul can even state, early in this discussion, that 'I do not say this as a command' (2 Corinthians 8:8). Commands are not bad or wrong, particularly when they serve to mobilise emergency action against evil. However, the collection relies on *affection* for the needy. Paul speaks of eagerness, cheerfulness, reciprocity, and joy, and does not try to command these. Rather, he shapes and forms these affections by describing the world differently, and by getting acquainted with God in Christ.

A new character

Human beings do not have immediate control over our affections. We feel this lack of control so acutely that we either consign ourselves to it – 'well, that's just the way I am' – or we threaten each other and ourselves with commands. However, this text opens up a new way forward. With the four 'poles' of its world view – *community-*

sustaining abundance, the wellspring God, the outwardness of grace, and the irresistible future – and (fifthly) by not resorting to a bare concept of command and duty, new affections and virtues – indeed, a whole new ‘character’ – can take root and grow.

The Macedonians immersed themselves into an abundant planet provided by an irresistibly gracious God, and into the total love of this God in Christ. They looked longingly towards his future reign of righteousness. This way of seeing nurtured their joy, their abundance-thinking, and their commitment to an equity that honoured the preciousness of the other instead of their own rights.

However, this kind of change is still not exactly in our control. When our affections are stuck – cold toward others, bleak about the future, hopeless about change – we really are helpless. Any change to our affections finally comes as a gift from God’s Spirit. As Paul puts it elsewhere,

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing,
so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.
(Romans 15:13)

We might each need to convert that saying into a prayed cry of desperate longing: ‘God of hope, fill *me* with all joy and peace in believing, so that *I* may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.’

I said I would begin in an unexpected place, by examining the way we feel. I have mainly considered each of us individually, considering how our affections change depending on where and how we direct our gaze. The Christian gaze and affections spring from community-sustaining abundance, the wellspring God, the outwardness of grace, and the irresistible future.

But what possible relevance can these observations have for social reform, advocacy, and political engagement? My initial intention has been to show that no engagement can occur when our affections are cold: this is the first roadblock to be addressed. However, we are surrounded by many others whose affections are cold. That they are

like this becomes a second roadblock: it seems impossible to believe that we can ever shift the apathy, the cold-heartedness, or the self-interested obsessions of those who surround us.

Roadblock 2: Individualism and the apathy of others

This hang-up is often voiced in a despairing, isolating, privatising and self-defeating mantra: ‘how can we impose our values upon others?’ So what, we think, if the Christian knows about community-sustaining abundance, the wellspring God, the outwardness of grace, and the irresistible future? If others do not, then we are stymied. We imagine that these others, being compelled by stories of possessive individualism, scarce resources, the absence of God and the emptiness of the future, therefore hold all the cards and that our advocacy can only fall upon deaf ears.

Nowadays I find myself breathless with frustration when Christians fall into this intellectual hole. I find it hard to know where to begin remonstrating with them. For our story is simply better. It is grounded in the person of Christ. It makes more sense of what it is to be a human. It brings joy, peace and hope because it is true. It is what possessive individualists need, despite their bravado.

Communities are constituted in part by what Oliver O’Donovan calls their ‘common objects of love’.⁶ The apostle John describes how individuals become voracious, intense, obsessive, and destructive about certain goods – but so also do societies, which is what he means by ‘the world’ in 1 John 2:15–17. The objects of our *common* love can also be truncated, deluded, or tunnel-visioned.

As I write, we have just lived through one of the most far-reaching and momentous demonstrations of this truth. A decades-long Western commitment to unregulated economic growth has resulted in an ideology of ‘market forces’. These have become beloved and treasured as benevolent physical laws – impersonal, yet guiding us to everything good. Of course recent events have revealed that ‘market forces’ are simply a summation of human culture, both at its best when we engage in the organised sharing called ‘the market’,

and at its worst when we give ourselves to mythical beasts such as the ‘securitisation’ of immorally constituted sub-prime loans. As a common object of love, ‘market forces’ have unravelled before our eyes. We took something basically good, loved it falsely, and sent it bad.⁷

**Christian advocacy
offers the true story
of society.**

Christian advocacy offers the true story of society. Community-sustaining abundance, the wellspring God, the outwardness of grace, and the irresistible future all serve to redirect a society’s gaze and offer better objects for our common love. What applies to individuals also applies to groups: we find our best group life when we live out community-sustaining abundance with other groups – whether through trade, cultural exchange, or aid and development. Just because not everyone will be convinced immediately is no reason to stay silent. Just because some conversations may veer towards Christian evangelism is no reason to stay silent. Just because not every conversation ends in Christian evangelism is no reason to stay silent. *We have a better story.*

Roadblock 3: Why all this theology?

I suppose I have inadvertently raised a third roadblock that is related to the mantra ‘how can we impose our values upon others?’, but for a different reason than that we are surrounded by the cold-hearted. For we also know those who care deeply for the world’s poor, but who profess no Christian commitment. It can be hard to see where a uniquely Christian story fits in alongside these others.

Therefore we tend to rally under the banner of ‘human rights’ in order to take action together. The concept of human rights has been around for centuries, but in the post-war milieu it was articulated and enhanced precisely to gather those with different ideological starting-points but who wanted similar ends. Some readers of my account will therefore be frustrated by a ‘theological overview’.

‘Why all this theology?’ they may ask. ‘Can’t we engage simply on the basis of human rights?’

I am persuaded by O’Donovan’s case that Christian theology, as expressed in the positive aspects of medieval Christendom’s polity, gave a powerful momentum to human rights thinking.⁸ Whether human rights can be sustained without Christian theology is an argument for another day, although I would argue that our conception of humanity becomes severely impoverished when rights are divorced from community-sustaining abundance, the wellspring God, the outwardness of grace, and the irresistible future. However for the purpose of this discussion I suggest simply this: of course we can willingly work alongside others, while never changing our Christian identity or story for anyone.

If community-sustaining abundance and the precious equity of humanity really is a part of the created order, then it is there for all. As we have seen, those whose gaze is distorted by possessive individualism and by ‘the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, and pride in riches’ may be blinded. But there is no Christian monopoly on seeing community-sustaining abundance and the equity of precious humanity. If these are part of who we are, it is no surprise when others see them too. To put this awareness of humanity under the banner of ‘human rights’ is simply a way of acknowledging that humanity is like this, if we care to direct our gaze properly. Others with this awareness become those with whom we can work.

The wellspring God and the irresistible future may be harder for others to see. In my view, without an assurance of this wellspring and this future, some secular human rights-motivated action begins to feel like a desperate rear-guard action by the lonely few against monstrous and overwhelming evils. These are undoubtedly hard conditions for people to work under. Humans need hope, and the best news for this planet is that its loving Lord has never given up on us. Our ultimate hopes will finally be realised by the wellspring God, but we (and our leaders) can run joyfully in that direction, and we may work hopefully alongside others who do not yet have this

hope. Secular human rights-motivated aid and development is often very helpful. It is just that Christians bring the infectious hope and joy of the Macedonians with them to the project of engagement, and no harm is done if some co-workers also find Christ as a result.

Roadblock 4: I don't know enough

In referring to 'social reform, advocacy, and political engagement' and 'the world's poor', I have glossed over a fourth roadblock. It has to do with our finitude and cluelessness. 'I don't know any poor people; I've never seen the developing world; and even if I did, I wouldn't know what is really needed.' These problems should not be dismissed lightly.

My glib phrase 'the world's poor' implies that these people are easily identified as one simple class, and perhaps that the solutions are straightforward. In reality there are many and various people, each of whom for various different reasons finds themselves excluded from the social and economic participation that others enjoy. Since these reasons are many and varied, there can be no substitute for sensitively getting to know the specifics of each person and community.

Some people, such as aid workers and experts in development, have the skill and opportunity to lead the rest of us in this knowledge. Aid and development workers do need to be gentle toward us punters who haven't seen what they have seen. When they mediate to us stories about others – as Paul did to the Macedonians and Corinthians – our affection for these others begins to grow, and we also grow in discernment about what needs to happen for these people.

To this end, each of us could also use our travels differently. Sometimes a detour to observe a development project might encourage those involved, and grow surprising new bonds of affection between ourselves and others. (Paul's concern for others seemed to grow the more he travelled and got to know them.)

We can also avoid being psychologically duped by modern media.

Day after day, news and current affairs inject a distillate of suffering into our minds. Because we cannot solve everything, we conclude we can do nothing. Plainly, the antidote to this false conclusion is to act on a human scale as we are able. To pick a few development projects, to follow its successes and setbacks, to get to know its leaders and workers, and to support it with money, prayer and promotion might be ‘all’ that we can do. Most certainly, that ‘all’ is not nothing.

Roadblock 5: It’s all too big

A fifth roadblock has to do with the seemingly monolithic nature of nations, social structures, and governments. Indeed, the early Christians did not take on big abstract categories such as ‘nation’, ‘social structure’, or ‘government’. They followed Jesus in human scale: church-collections, testimonies to Christ, facing down the odd Roman official. Particularly in my conservative camp, some therefore conclude that there is no biblical warrant for Christian social reform or advocacy.

However, this odd conclusion is not applied in so many other areas of life. We take and use many opportunities to love our neighbour that no early Christian enjoyed. In performing surgery, harnessing nuclear physics or studying an economy, we share something with our neighbour for their good. No early Christians had the opportunity to act in these ways, yet we do not conclude that we lack ‘biblical warrant’ to do so. Similarly, modern political forms of life open opportunities to tell the truth to those who lead us, even if they have been given authority by God (Romans 13:1–7). The truth we tell may be very basic, as when we remind politicians that justice matters and that ‘possessive individualism’ is false. The truth we tell may be far more detailed, as when we become expert in policy development and in writing submissions to government committees. However, there is no compelling reason not to tell it. What leaders then do is between them and the God who will judge how they led.⁹

In fact, through the early Christians and their human-scale

engagements, God effectively set off irresistible social changes. Arguable examples include the valuing of female infants, social care for the sick and dying, and the eventual demise of slavery in the British Empire. Historical stories like these are beyond my scope, but my point is that Christian action had a ripple effect that dragged even rulers along with it.¹⁰ There is no permanently impermeable state power. One way or another, it is all subject to Christ.

Roadblock 6: What is the best strategy to employ?

A sixth roadblock worries over the best aid and development strategies to employ. Every situation in life requires an informed judgment call. Some situations call for indigenous responsibility and industry, as when ‘micro-financing’ enables small business start-ups. Other situations are distorted by concentrations of power that have grown over the years, such as when the ‘free market’ excludes many producers from participation in trade. In situations like these, a ‘fair trade’ initiative becomes an appropriate and helpful response. There are no shortcuts to determining the best approach to each complex situation. Indeed, sometimes we trust NGOs such as World Vision precisely *because* its people on the ground have the knowledge and expertise to make a judgment call about what is needed. (They also need latitude – even forgiveness – when they make a wrong call.)

Paul’s collection does not answer every complexity, but it *does* telegraph one truth loud and clear. There are times when a group or society is so excluded from social and economic participation that simple grace is needed.¹¹ It does not matter what put them there or whether or not they ‘brought it on themselves’. God’s remediation of our situation was not contingent upon any such evaluations. We only know ‘the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ’: though he was rich, for our sakes he became poor (2 Corinthians 8:9). In God’s grace, it doesn’t matter who we are or what we’ve done. We are simply loved, and Christ pays all to get us back.

Similarly, how people came to their situation is irrelevant to some aid work. A community may have been crippled by war, or by a

dysfunctional or corrupt government. Or something toxic in a local culture has destroyed trust and ruined relationships. In situations like these, total dependence on others may be required for a time (as in a refugee setting), and ‘love’ consists in discerning and setting the conditions under which people can prosper again. Hopefully, the day will come when they know abundance, and can gracefully use it for someone else’s need (cf. 2 Corinthians 8:14).

Conclusion

I have tried to show some distinctive Christian reasons for social reform, advocacy, and political engagement: namely, community-sustaining abundance, the wellspring God, the outwardness of grace, and the irresistible future. These four poles of our world view change our gaze and our affections, and give us something to work with when we set out to assist the world’s poor. I hope I have helped with some of your roadblocks to meaningful engagement. Of course the rest of this book will deal with many of them more expertly than I can.

But remember also that prayed cry of desperate longing: ‘God of hope, fill *me* with all joy and peace in believing, so that *I* may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.’ Try reading 2 Corinthians 8–9: you won’t know all the people, and you won’t recognise the places, but something might shift a little as you read. See if your heart feels a little fuller. See if a bit of the Macedonians – and something of our wonderful God – is transmitted to you. You never know what might happen.

For reflection

1. Read 2 Corinthians 8–9. What is distinctive about the Macedonian Christians and what can we learn from them?
2. Of the six roadblocks to social engagement, which one do you most identify with in your life?
3. What, if anything, do you find helpful in overcoming this roadblock?

Notes

1. I am grateful to my colleague, Revd Dr Andrew Ford, for his comments on a draft of this chapter.
2. Oliver M.T. O'Donovan, *The Ways of Judgment: The Bampton Lectures, 2003*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids MI, 2005, p. 249. I have been greatly helped by Oliver O'Donovan's ethical, social and political thought. I hope what follows will function as an introduction of sorts. The best starting point for further exploration is Oliver M.T. O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics*, Apollos, Leicester, 1994. However, his social and political thought is better developed in later works.
3. David S. Cunningham, *Christian Ethics: The End of the Law*, Routledge, Oxford, 2008, p. 33.
4. *ibid.*
5. I have explored these themes elsewhere: see Andrew Cameron, 'How to say YES to the World: Towards a New Way Forward in Evangelical Social Ethics', *Reformed Theological Review*, vol. 66, no. 1, 2007, pp. 23–36.
6. Oliver M.T. O'Donovan, *Common Objects of Love: Moral Reflection and the Shaping of Community*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids MI, 2002.
7. O'Donovan, *The Ways of Judgment*, pp. 63–66, 246–48.
8. Oliver M.T. O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996, especially chapters 6–7.
9. What if a tyrant continues to act miserably? A discussion of this hard case belongs elsewhere, but O'Donovan's thought is again helpful. The one and only case for war arises when leaders act so badly that their terrible injustices can be corrected in no other way. War stands in relation to justice in the same way that 'an emergency operation, performed in a remote mountain hut with a penknife, stands to the same surgery performed under clinical conditions in a hospital.' See Oliver M.T. O'Donovan, *The Just War Revisited*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003, p. 18. War is sometimes the roughest, if most unsatisfying, form of justice available.
10. The history of Christianity's impact on society and politics can be seen in Oliver M.T. O'Donovan & Joan Lockwood O'Donovan, *From Irenaeus to Grotius: A Sourcebook in Christian Political Thought, 100–1625*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids MI, 1999, and in O'Donovan's *The Desire of the Nations*; or from a different perspective, Rodney Stark, *One True God: Historical Consequences of Monotheism*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2001, and subsequent works by him.
11. O'Donovan, *The Ways of Judgment*, pp. 44–47 & chapter 3.