

Our Societal Mission

A Christian and Christianity in the World
A Believer and the Church in Society

I Introduction

1.1. The love of a child of God toward someone in the world

Our beloved speaker brother, the late Ville Suutari, related the following incident from one of his mission trips, which will lead us into the essence of our topic. When, a long time ago, he was in a rural Finnish village on one of his speaking trips, he met a certain speaker brother. This brother was very troubled because his unbelieving neighbor continuously made fun of and harassed him with his scornful ridicule.

Once when winter was changing to spring, they ended up on the same log floating crew on a river. Our brother was entrusted with the task of paying the workers their wages. When this neighbor came to get his pay from him, he pointed out how wet and ragged his boots were. "Go ahead and take these good boots of mine, since I don't have to work in the water," the brother said, and traded boots with him. That's when he noticed his neighbor's torn, filthy and wet socks inside the boots. "Go ahead and take these new socks which my wife sent me," he said, and gave his new socks to his neighbor.

During the same summer, once they had returned home from the log floating job to their home village, the neighbor came to knock on our brother's window one night, and he wanted to come inside. He repented and said that he felt the love that our brother had shown toward him could not but be heavenly love.

This story leads us to note a few things:

1. Individual believers in that locality had loved the undying souls of their neighbors by speaking to them with the word of God.
2. Because of love toward his employer, our speaker brother had done his work conscientiously and had been given the responsible job of paymaster.
3. While performing his duties as paymaster, he demonstrated what values had been inspired by Christian forgiveness and love of his neighbor, which, by faith, guided his heart.

The foregoing leads us to conclude that we, as Christians, have a dual mission in the world:

- 1) To love human beings with the word of God
- 2) To love human beings with our deeds

How could we show love without being involved with people? How could even God have shown His love without becoming flesh and dwelling amongst us?

1.2. The exhortations to love found in God's word:

We are guided to so do by the word of God:

Matt. 5:16 – “Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.”

Matt. 5:41 – “And whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain.”

Matt. 5:44 – “Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you.”

2 Cor. 3:2 – “Ye are the epistle of Christ.”

1.3. We have been called to love in word and deeds.

We will next broaden our perspective from the confined surroundings of a rural home village,” and a workplace that is a river where logs are floated to the surroundings that we all share and from the “neighbor *man*” and “our speaker brother” to all neighbors and all Christians.

1) First in regard to the surroundings:

- a) As inhabitants of a rural village and as neighbors, the men lived in singular surroundings, where they had contact when they visited in homes or happened to meet when going about their business in the village. Their fellowship was based on free, bidirectional, situational interaction. This can be active or passive, friendly or hostile. In this instance, the speaker brother had apparently been active in speaking about matters of faith, and this had aroused an active and hostile resistance in the neighbor.
- b) As “river pigs” or log drivers they were part of an established social environment, wherein people have contact and conduct themselves according to previously agreed upon principles, while, however, adapting to it in their own style that reflects their personal attitudes and values. In these, people may conduct themselves honestly or dishonestly, irresponsibly or responsibly, with indifference or with love. In this instance the speaker brother conducted himself with love, the neighbor was at first indifferent, but, in the end, responded to love with love.

2) Secondly in regard to people:

- a) The “neighbor man” represented a person who is under the dominion of the world or unbelief. The people of the world may have, as was the case in the story, a scornful attitude toward faith and believers, or they may be curious, or they may withdraw, or show understanding, even feeling sorry for us, or be indifferent, or respectful.
- b) The “neighbor man” also represented a person as a member of the community, of society – a fellow villager, one of our own kind. As members of the community we all share an objective: trying to gain better living conditions in every regard. Some strive for this objective dishonestly, others honestly, some selfishly, others unselfishly some are active, others passive. In this instance, both men were apparently honest and worked.
- c) As a neighbor and working man the “speaker brother” represented an individual Christian, but as a “preacher” he represented the congregation of Christians. As individual Christians we can withdraw or be active, we can be fearful or bold. So also as a congregation we can either withdraw or be active. In this instance the “speaker brother” was active when he spoke about matters of faith with the word of God and, later, in his duties as paymaster, he did not remember the wrongs he had experienced, nor did he shrink from showing active love toward the other. The Christian congregation, in this instance, was active in organizing mission services at the request of individual Christians. It would be consistent with the customs of those times, and very probable, that services had been organized and held even in the home of that neighbor man.

II Questions

Now we can pose some questions:

- 1) What is the mission of an individual Christian in society?
- 2) What is the mission of the church in society?
- 3) What kind of participation in the affairs of society is meant by the expression “we are in the world”?
- 4) According to what laws and instructions do individual Christians get involved in the affairs of society?
- 5) According to what instructions does the church nowadays get involved in the affairs of society?
- 6) What dangers are there in getting involved in the affairs of society?

III Answers

3.1 Dangers

One obstacle to the conveying of the love of God into the world is caused by Christians withdrawing themselves from the people of the world. The word of God has warnings about the dangers of the love of the world (= living in worldly ways, that is, in the freedom of sin or in self-righteousness). “Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful.” (Ps. 1:1) “And what concord hath Christ with Belial? or what part hath he that believeth with an infidel?” (2 Cor 6:15) “Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world.” (I John 2:15-16). In many instances, because we feel the weakness of our flesh, there is reason to separate ourselves from unbelieving friends whenever their way of life is not in accordance with our conscience. The speaker brother in our example certainly did not participate in the sinful ways of the neighbor man when he went drinking with others, or when he made fun of the speaker brother. But this can lead us astray in the sense that we would not dare, nor want to have any doings, even constructive doings with our unbelieving friends either. Note how the speaker brother in our example did not withdraw from his neighbor when he was issuing his pay, but boldly and openly reacted to the very apparent need that his neighbor had. “There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear: because fear hath torment. He that feareth is not made perfect in love.” (1 John 4:18). Although we are not of the world, we are in the world. We will today go deeper into what it means to be in the world.

3.2. Congregational setting

Another reason for the caution that Christians have toward the people of the world is the effect the congregation and the congregation’s activities have on us. We all have an inclination to follow examples that we see during our lives. One good and commendable source of such examples is the congregation and congregational activities. In many things it provides good examples, as, for instance: how to rear children in Christianity and to put the word of God into practice by singing and studying the Bible. Sometimes, however, there is room for criticism too. For the most part, we see how the congregation approaches unbelievers only with the word of God. We really have not become accustomed to the idea that the congregation would direct its activity toward the unbelievers in any other manner, for example: by taking collections for unbelievers, for founding hospitals or schools for them, or by taking stands on political issues. But individual Christians need not look at this restraint by the congregation as a whole as an example for their personal involvement. Even so, it may be that this example is duplicated to some degree in our individual lives as well.

3.3. Societal setting

A third difficulty might be found in the way of thinking that confuses the roles of the church and the government. They each have their own duty and characteristics. The congregation is sacred, because the word of God, which is given life by the Holy Ghost by means of the children of God, works there. A government, on the other hand, is not guided by the word of God even if it is led by, or it has participation in its administration by children of God, who are able to exercise wisdom inspired by the Holy Spirit. A government is not under the administration of an evil spirit, or the spirit of the world, and it is not in opposition to the church. The children of God live here as members both of the church and the society of their country. Within the congregation they are involved according to the word of God and in society according to their conscience and the laws of the land. Neither are the congregation and the government in competition, so that the child of God would have to struggle to gain control of the government. Luther summed up the relationship between the government and the church in his doctrine of the two regimes:

1. Church

- purpose: make people righteous
- means: the gospel

2. Government

- purpose: guarantee outward peace and keep evil conduct under constraint
- means: the law and ruling by compulsion

Luther sums up these two regimes thus: “These two regimes must be separated and kept separate from each other, and both must be maintained – the one to make people righteous, and the other to provide external peace and to keep evil conduct under constraint. In this world neither is sufficient without the other.” Luther was not in favor of believers withdrawing from society into monasteries. Neither was he in favor of enacting the word of God in society by the rule of compulsion involving law and the courts of law.

IV Our Mission Statement

In its third part the mission statement of the LLC and its member congregations says:

“Our task is to awaken and inspire Christian values and ethics, soberness of mind, love of homeland, and responsible citizenship among the people of our nations.”

V How can these be promoted in the congregations and in the lives of individual Christians?

A) As a congregation

1. Our basic principle

It would appear that when it comes to getting involved in the affairs of the world around us, Christianity has been following a logical format. Individual believers have been at the forefront when it has been necessary to have dealings with the lives of the people around us, and the church has followed to give its support when the strength and resources of individuals have not sufficed. This has happened, for example, in our foreign mission work: The seed of the word was sown by individual believers, and when this has led to growth, and help has been needed, Christianity has sent missionaries to the grain field of the Lord.

So also in providing aid, individual Christians have initiated the efforts to aid brothers and sisters in faith, and the congregations have supported this as needed. Is this the guiding principle of Christianity in these matters? *Comment from a representative of the LLC.*

2. The teaching of the church on the topic of a Christian in society

One of the duties of the church is to rear the children and youth to become responsible members of society. Why have such topics been adopted into the curriculum for Sunday school, Bible class and Confirmation school? *Comment from some teacher.*

3. Editorial opinion

From time to time there are editorials or other articles in the periodicals of Christianity that take a stand on some contemporary issues in our world. *Comment from Paul Waaraniemi.*

4. Foreign aid projects

In recent times there has been exposure to financial aid for brothers and sisters in the field of foreign mission work. There were collections to provide aid already in apostolic times, and so also in our time. Is this an instance of supporting the activities of a congregation or of improving the financial status of individuals? *Comment from Jon Bloomquist.*

5. Other forms of temporal aid

The service agenda for this weekend includes a presentation and discussion on tobacco and drugs. There have been discussions at many camps on issues linked to marriage, mental health, or physical health. Some congregations have offered their facilities for use as polling places in elections.

Some individual Christians want to aid people in distress, both in the homeland and abroad, through various charitable organizations. For example, the Red Cross helped the victims of last fall's terrorist attacks. But our congregations have not, nevertheless, collected money for these charitable organizations, nor have they established comparable aid programs on their own. Or have we? *Comment on this.*

B) As individual Christians

1. Home

The home is the basic unit cell and scale model of society. It is also a scale model of the kingdom of God. The same basic elements are found in the home as in society: authority, rules, education, work, and the same structural components as in the kingdom of God: the gospel and faith. There are two regimes in the home: earthly and spiritual. The parents do double duty as law enforcers and soul caretakers. How are these roles blended together in everyday life in the home? Should the home be like the society that surrounds us? *Comment from some parent.*

2. School

The school teaches knowledge and skills. One of these skills is cooperation and getting along with others. It teaches us believers how we can work and live with unbelievers. How could these skills be taught if a

student is schooled at home or if believers had their own school? *Comment from someone who has home-schooled their children.*

Sometimes parents have to have discussions with the teachers on the content of education at school and the methods that are used, when these exceed what is acceptable to a good conscience. What would be a good way to take care of these things? Should we go to school alone, as individual parents, or as a group of parents, or as representatives of the congregation? Do we speak of the matters from our own consciences, or as teachings of the congregation? Will the school listen to us? *Comment from a parent.*

3. Neighborhood

Anne Eskelinen, a believing mother in Laukaa, was bothered when the parents in the neighborhood did not say anything even though they saw that the children in that village were engaging in impermissible conduct. She called the parents together, and they made a joint decision to start rearing all of the children in the neighborhood as though they were their own. The project was given the name “Together into Life.” Soon the idea spread throughout Finland. The project is now a recipient of funds from the EU and Anne Eskelinen has gone to talk about the project in many localities. What does this teach us? Our simple values, which are in accordance with Christian love, may have a demand and be valuable in this world.

4. Our speech and our conduct

We can speak and be involved passively, that is, the minimum that is required by laws and codes, or actively a great deal more voluntarily. What would this mean in school and student life? *Comment from someone who is active in school affairs.*

5. Work environment

Heeding supervisors, diligence and honesty are part of our work ethic. We are also tempted in these aspects. The opistos in Finland have sometimes provided weekend courses where, for example, businessmen have been able to discuss ethics for entrepreneurs. *Comment from a believing businessman.*

6. Politics

Encouragement for us: there are many brothers and sisters in Finland who have faithfully served in politics, some at the national, others at the local level. One of these is a very well-known late brother of ours, Väinö Havas, who was elected to a municipal council at the age of 32 and to parliament at the age of 39. He rendered his most precious service to society, however, as a volunteer soldier in the war against Russia, where he fell in battle at the age of 43. *Experiences from some brother or sister who has been involved in politics.*

7. Patriotism, and military service

Comment from a young person who has been in the Armed Forces, or from a war veteran.

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