Gustavus Adolphus College

Sharing Together:
Compassion, Luther and Neighbor-Love in a Globalized World

A Senior Thesis Submitted To

The Faculty of the Religion Department

By

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Preface

[God] is found in the humble cots of such as are poor and despised…[1]

-Martin Luther

When I arrived at Gustavus Adolphus College as a transfer student three years ago, I was an atheist. I could not find anything within to help me believe in the things I had been taught for so many years in the Lutheran Church, confirmation, and Catholic schools I attended. The Lutheran faith no longer spoke to me as it had when I was a young boy pretending to read the prayers and hymns as I sat in the pew with my parents. I did not like being an atheist. It was devoid of hope. For some, atheism means an emphasis on life now. For me, atheism meant that life now did not even matter. Ultimately, this is the reason I became a religion major. I needed to either find some answers or I wanted to absolutely disprove everything.

My atheism slowly evolved into agnosticism, as I lost the passion I once had for religion. To me, agnosticism was peace and a mind that was not preoccupied with the existence of a god or the divinity of Christ. I remember telling a professor of mine from the religion department that I was not going to worry about deep issues anymore. She responded by asking me why we were even talking. I floated by in my religion classes, while my interests and time turned to other academic subjects like political science or economics. Books like *Siddhartha* by Hermann Hesse, the Bible of any spiritually lost college student, taught me to find my own religion. I turned my back on the Christianity

[1] Martin Luther, "Third Sermon on Pentecost Sunday," in *Sermons of Martin Luther*, ed. John N. Lenker (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1983), 3: 316.

of my youth, which I now considered outmoded, offering nothing to the needs of the current world. I did not anticipate that my world was about to be turned upside down.

The fall of my senior year I decided to study abroad in Central America. After five weeks in Guatemala, we arrived in El Salvador for a month of studying liberation theology with a Catholic nun from the United States, Dr. Peggy O'Neil. The pain and suffering the common people of El Salvador had experienced, and the apparent hopelessness of their current situation, hit me as if I had just run face first into a wall.

I met the survivors of massacres. I saw the pictures of Monseñor Romero after his murder. I kneeled at the rose garden that commemorates the murder of six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper, and her daughter by government troops. I was surrounded every day by the crime, oppression, and injustice that still pervade El Salvador. Spiritually, something started to happen to me in El Salvador as I experienced religion through the eyes and words of liberation theologians as well as poor carpenters and maquila workers. I realized that religion without a social praxis was worthless. The religion of my youth, more concerned with the individual's relationship with God and a few acts of charity than with combating social injustice, was wasting its power of community and ignoring its call to neighborly love and sacrifice.

The Christianity I found in the base communities and religious leaders of El Salvador, however, began to pull me back to my Christian heritage. I saw the power the Christian church could wield when it acted as an agent of social change and a voice for the oppressed among us or, as Jesus put it, the least among us. My experience in El Salvador created a aching in my soul to be rooted in something. When I arrived in Nicaragua, a poor coffee farmer who had survived attacks by President Reagan's contra

fighters, a life of economic hardship, and the indifference of her current government, put everything together for me. Doña Cecilia, after telling me her stories of hunger, war, death, and suffering, grabbed my hands, looked me in the eyes, and said, "The only thing that has gotten me through this life is my faith in Jesus Christ."

Forget theological discussions; lose the intellectual rhetoric, and do not get too caught up in the doctrine. A poor, uneducated peasant woman from Nicaragua captured in one sentence what I have come to see as the essence of Christianity. Doña Cecelia's faith liberated her. God is a God of the oppressed. The Christian faith is one of liberation.

Introduction

Globalization is here and North Americans are now connected to everyone worldwide. We talk on the phone with an Indian in a call center; we run our German cars on oil from the Middle East and Africa; and we bump into Latin Americans in the mall while buying products made predominantly in Asia. Our world has become smaller as the internet, cell phones, and nightly newscasts bring us face to face with friends and family abroad, international businesses competing for customers, and the tragic effects of genocide.

But our world has also become larger. No longer do the actions of ordinary U.S. citizens affect only local citizens, local businesses, and the local environment. Rather, our actions, and their consequences, are global now. If American consumers did not demand petroleum, we would not be at war with Iraq. If we did not shop simply for the "best deal" or the lowest price at our local retailers, the clothes they carry would not be

made at a *maquila*, or sweatshop, in Honduras. Our habits and our actions have *global* consequences.

The slogan "Think Globally, Act Locally" is on the right track, but it has shortcomings, for there must be an emphasis on *thinking* locally as well. This slogan is often skewed, and sometimes comes to mean that we must simply *respond* to global events with local action—such as solidarity vigils for victims of war or informational meetings on poverty or AIDS in Africa. This paper has a different emphasis: it argues that we must consider how our local actions are *already* affecting the world. Local practices have global consequences and as such, local thinking needs to take into account the global power wielded by our actions. Instead of only turning global thought into local action, we must also concern ourselves with the manner in which our day-to-day lives are already contributing to the negative effects of globalization.

No other country on earth has more global influence than the United States does. We influence elections; we invade countries; and the entire world's economy depends on our own. Nicaraguans could not understand that most Americans have never spared a second thought to the welfare or current events of Nicaragua. It made no sense to them because for the last 100 years, Nicaragua's history has been inundated by U.S. action and influence. When Reagan's "freedom fighters" waged war against the Sandinista government of Nicaragua during the 1980's, 30,000 Nicaraguans were killed. If Americans knew about this, they hardly blinked. Nicaragua is still the second poorest country in the Western Hemisphere, but I always wonder how much better off they could have been if the common American had cared. In this case, local indifference or maybe

just ignorance in the United States has led to generations of pain and hardship in Nicaragua. Our action, as much as our inaction, reverberates globally.

Theologically, what does all this mean? What, if anything, needs to be reinterpreted as humans begin this new stage of globalization? Are U.S. Christians complicit in the impoverishment of so much of the human family? If we are, what are we as U.S. Christians called to do in this new epoch, and how must we respond to these global issues? The rest of this paper will revolve around the theological issues pertaining to this core question.

Methodology

The paper will begin with a discussion of Christian ethics, specifically, in response to the question of what Christians are called to do when confronted by the suffering of others. When ignorance has been lifted and we know about suffering, is it sinful or unChristian if we do not respond compassionately? Or rather does the knowledge of suffering compel us to act? If there is, as Mary Solberg claims, "a profoundly theological significance at the heart of human knowing,"[2] perhaps it lies in the moral and ethical implications of that knowing for the way we live our lives, and maybe on a deeper level, for our vocation. If theology is truly at the heart of knowing, then the awareness of suffering must be deeply theological as well. If this is so, then to be heartfelt in our actions, there must be both a physical *and* spiritual response to knowledge.

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[2] Mary Solberg, *Compelling Knowledge: A Feminist Proposal for an Epistemology of the Cross* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 12-13.

Most Americans have no idea of the level of suffering and impoverishment found in less-developed countries. Is this simply a lack of knowledge, however, or does the lack of understanding of worldwide suffering run deeper, possibly even to a cultural level? One could blame the media for only focusing on the latest celebrity scandal or other shock news, but does that not implicate the consumers of popular media as well? I contend that there is something deeper in American culture that leads to a general lack of interest in global issues, particularly the suffering of others. For instance, the following excerpt is from a study done by Roper Public Affairs for the National Geographic Education Foundation. The study was a compilation of interviews with young U.S. residents ranging from eighteen to twenty-four years of age and concerned the geographic knowledge of young American adults.

> …[S]urvey results show cause for concern. Six in ten (63%) cannot find Iraq on a map of the Middle East, despite near-constant news coverage since the U.S. invasion of March 2003. Three-quarters cannot find Indonesia on a map—even after images of the tsunami and the damage it caused to this region of the world played prominently across televisions screens and in the pages of print media over many months in 2005. Three-quarters (75%) of young men and women do not know that a majority of Indonesia's population is Muslim (making it the largest Muslim country in the world), despite the prominence of this religion in global news today. Neither wars nor natural disasters appear to have compelled majorities of young adults to absorb knowledge about international places in the news.[3]

Furthermore, consider the following from the same study:

> Moreover, their lack of knowledge does not seem particularly alarming to many young Americans. Half think it is "important but not absolutely necessary" either to know where countries in the news are located (50%) or to be able to speak a foreign language (47%) - and six in ten (62%) young Americans cannot speak a second language fluently (38% report being able to speak one or more non-native

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[3] Roper Public Affairs, *National Geographic—Roper Public Affairs 2006 Geographic Literacy Study*, National Geographic Society. http://www.nationalgeographic.com/roper2006/findings.html (accessed March 25, 2007), 6.

> languages "fluently"). Indeed, young adults are far more likely to say speaking a foreign language is "not too important" (38%) than to say it is "absolutely necessary" (14%).[4]

The study concludes that young Americans "are unprepared for an increasingly global future."[5] However, beyond questioning the United States' future well-being, what does this study say about U.S. culture as it is right now? It seems that there is a failure to relegate to U.S. youth a sense of importance on global events, cultures, and peoples. Surely this trend does not begin when people reach the age of eighteen, but rather is the cause of years of cultural "nurturing." The results of the National Geographic study are a reflection of a U.S. culture that shows a general lack of interest in global occurrences and the situations of those found outside our country's borders.

Possibly, the conclusions drawn from this study, such as lack of geographic knowledge, interest, and understanding among U.S. youth, could be directly correlated to a general lack of concern for the extreme suffering found outside U.S. borders. Are U.S. residents charitable? Yes, as a whole Americans are extremely charitable. In fact, in 2005, Americans gave $260.3 billion, or 2.1% of GDP.[6] However, charity does not even begin to change the social structures that create poverty, malnutrition, lack of opportunity, and ethnic cleansing. Therefore, this paper argues that North American Christians are called to subversively challenge the causes of global suffering. Furthermore, theologically, the ignorance of extreme human suffering by North American Christians cannot be excused. The first section contends that not only must

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[4] Ibid., 6-7.

[5] Ibid., 7.

[6] United Nations Fund for International Partnerships, *Basic Facts of US Giving.* http://www.un.org/unfip/YStatFactsOnUsGiving.htm (accessed April 26, 2007).

North American Christians respond to the knowledge of another's suffering, but that knowledge must also be sought out.

As I am writing from a Lutheran perspective, the next section will draw directly on the life and writings of Martin Luther (1483 -1546). Luther was not only a theological radical—using "radical" to signify a subversive agent who challenges the status quo—but an intensely socially conscious citizen as well. Studies of Luther often emphasize his theological ideas such as justification by faith. But what did Luther have to say about the social conditions of his own time? Did Luther's theology carry over into social activism, and if it did, what can we learn from this, and how can we apply it to our own lives?

Luther had much to say about the German economy as it moved from a feudalistic system toward a more modern economic system. While Luther's economic theories cannot be transferred completely to our modern context, it is clear that his responses to social problems were deeply influenced by a sense that the Christian life was full of responsibility for the neighbor's well-being.

I will then use Luther's ideas concerning neighbor love to bring us to the third section of this paper which is an examination of the implications of Jesus' call to love our neighbors in today's globalized world. As Cynthia Moe-Lobeda writes, Luther believed that being truly free is no longer being "self turned in upon self," but turned instead toward God in trust and our neighbor in full, compassionate love.[7] Most Christians would agree that we are called to live the faith by loving our neighbor. However, in a globalized world to whom exactly does the term "neighbor" refer? In the Gospel of Matthew Jesus says the following:

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[7] Cynthia D. Moe-Lobeda, *Healing a Broken World: Globalization and God*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 2002), 86.

> 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… Just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me (25:40, 45 NRSV).

The least among us, though, are no longer close to home. Many, perhaps most of them, are thousands of miles away from Christian churches in the United States. Does the word "neighbor" encompass the oppressed of Third World countries? In this section I will contend that if the distance between Americans and the oppressed peoples of the world can be traversed by our actions, our consumption, our voting, and our ignorance, so too can it be traversed by Christ's call for neighborly love.

Pulling the last three sections together, I will end with a discussion of the implications for American Christians this field of theology could produce. In essence, what are we able to do as North-American Christians, and what *must* we do?

Much that is written about globalization vilifies developed countries like the United States or large multi-national corporations. Though these critiques may be warranted, I do not think this approach will succeed in changing the often oppressive nature of the globalization process. Rather, this paper contends that we must look into our own lives and practices if we are to progress at all in easing the suffering of the oppressed and impoverished of this world. For example, one can critique Wal-Mart's practices all one wants, but as long as U.S. consumers continue to shop at Wal-Mart, those practices are not going to change. The same goes for Nike's sweatshops and Starbucks' coffee farmers. A corporation is a more representative entity to the wants of its "constituents" than some governments, in the sense that it must immediately respond to consumer demand. If a consumer stops buying a product for ethical reasons, there is nothing the corporation can do besides change their practices (as long as their marketing

scheme does not work). In the name of its god, called Profit, the corporation must do what its customers want it to do. Knowing this and understanding our connections to the oppressed of this world, how can we harness this power and "vote" with our money, so that multi-national corporations engage in ethical and humane practices that promote rather than degrade human dignity?

Knowledge, Suffering, and Christian Duty

When we are forced to acknowledge suffering we must decide to either respond to the suffering or ignore it.[8] There is no middle ground, for one cannot simply pretend that one does not know. As Christians, however, when facing the suffering of others we must ask ourselves if we are *called* to respond because of our faith. Said differently, is ignoring the suffering of others, specifically those in the Third World, an acceptable decision as a Christian? Or is it our Christian duty to respond to suffering in an attempt to end it, or at least lessen the weight of the burden? Liberation theology, I was told in El Salvador, meant nothing more than bringing the oppressed down from their crosses. The problem is the acknowledgment of human suffering, and the decision not to ignore it may mean we have to take up our own crosses in the process. Is this because the knowledge itself is a burden? And if so, why?

Maybe this last question can be partially answered by the idea of "guilt." We experience guilt because we know of something or we have done something for which we feel at least partially responsible. There were many instances in high school when I felt too guilty *not* to tell my parents what I had done, whether it was putting a dent in my car

[8] Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 63.

or the *real* reasons I was not home at curfew. I told them because I could not handle the weight of a lie. Often, guilt churns inside of us until we are forgiven by those we have affected by our actions, and even then it may persist. This happens because the knowledge of what has happened, and our role in that process, overwhelms us. When we see the consequences of our actions and what it means to the life of another, that knowledge becomes a burden. We are guilty. We are sinners. Even so, are we called to respond to the extreme suffering of so many?

As United States citizens, one could argue that there needs to be a utilitarian response to suffering. One has to look no further than September 11, 2001 to realize that it is in the United States' best interest to seek the end of the suffering caused by oppressive social institutions. Persons of some developing countries, where poverty is rampant and social strife is ubiquitous, come to resent the material well-being of the people of the United States. One has only to read the daily newspaper to understand how hated we are in many countries. The United States flag is burned regularly at political rallies from Pakistan and Iran to Mexico. We consume their resources, we wage wars over oil, we demand that they establish "American" democracy, and we deport their loved ones. We do not try to understand foreign cultures. Rather, we judge their beliefs, their traditions, and their religions. Maybe most important, aside from charity, we do not attempt to help them in their suffering. Instead, we are perceived as the cause of it.

According to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), about 1.2 billion of the world's people are between the ages of 10 and 19, and eighty-seven percent of these

people are growing up in developing nations.[9] Imagine the implications if these people come of age believing they are disenfranchised by the hegemony of the United States. When I think about the effect the Iraq war will have on the world, I do not think about the next few years. Fifteen years in the future, rather, a generation of young Iraqis will come into power after surviving continuous violence, hatred, and a U.S. occupation. If we do not seek the well-being of foreign peoples, we will enter into an epoch dominated by anti-American sentiment. This would be harmful to not only our security, but also our economic interests.

In addition to pragmatic, self-interested motives, ethical considerations compel us to respond to the suffering of others. Immanuel Kant argued that we are to treat people as ends unto themselves.[10] Persons are able to act in accordance with what they deem "moral obligations," and are autonomous beings able to determine themselves rather than being determined completely by external occurrences.[11] As Kant writes, a "market price" cannot be put on humans, for humans have an "inner worth," that is, we have dignity, "an unconditional, incomparable worth."[12] Human dignity requires that we treat other humans with respect and not as a means to an end. Margaret A. Farley writes, "To

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[9] United Nations Population Fund, *Fast Facts.* http://www.unfpa.org/adolescents/facts.htm.

[10] Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals,* ed. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 42-43, 45.

[11] Margaret A. Farley, "A Feminist Version of Respect for Persons," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 9 Spring/Fall (1993), 187.

[12] Kant, 42-43.

respect persons as ends in themselves is to *relate* to them as valuable in themselves, not just valuable for me…"[13]

In terms of globalization, when corporations enter a country in search of cheap labor, the corporations are using that country's impoverished people as a means to an end, that is, profit. When Iraqi and Afghani civilians were killed in the United States' initial invasions of these countries, these deaths were viewed as "collateral damage," and ultimately, a means to an end. In our day-to-day lives, when we buy coffee harvested by a farmer who did not receive a fair price and is not able to support his family, we are using that farmer as a means to an end. We are not seeing him as someone worthy of dignity or as an end unto himself. In instances like the examples given, we must respond and demand that the dignity of others be respected. When suffering is caused by degrading practices that use humans as a means to an end, we are ethically called to act against these practices. To understand our "inner worth" as humans is to acknowledge that any suffering caused by a challenge to human dignity is unjust and must be subversively engaged.

Most important to this paper, however, is my contention that as Christians, we must make a compassionate response to human suffering. What does it mean to be compassionate? The etymology of the word "compassion" may help us understand the significance of this word to the Christian faith. It originates from the Latin roots, *com*, which means together, and *pati*, which means to suffer. To be compassionate, we must *suffer together*, ensuring that no one is carrying their burdens alone. Together, we are called to acknowledge and defend the humanity of all persons, supporting each other and

[13] Farley, 187.

responding to the suffering of others. Writing about her work with the homeless in the United States, Rebecca Davis states that when she meets the eyes of a homeless person, "in that moment, we seem to recognize that there is really no counter or threshold separating us."[14] Davis is not at a higher level looking down or unconnected to the homeless person. Rather, as their eyes meet, she realizes that she must share in the suffering of that person. She must be compassionate.

But what is the religious basis for a response to suffering? The work of Mary Solberg may lead us in the right direction. Solberg approaches this question from an epistemological standpoint. She writes, "knowing is an activity that requires participation and demands both commitment and judgment from the knower."[15] In essence, knowers are not innocent.[16] Knowledge becomes part of the knower whether the knower produces or acquires it and in effect we cannot be innocent of this activity. Ignorance, therefore, is the only possible excuse for inaction in regard to the suffering of others. However, I contend that the ignorance of suffering in the Third World by a U.S. resident cannot be justified. As I elaborate on below, Christians are called to seek out the suffering of others. In the United States, ignorance of suffering is not an excuse; it is a decision. Information regarding the suffering of others is available, even if we cannot ever fully comprehend the enormity of that suffering. The point is, we are not innocent, but consciously making a decision not to act.

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[14] Rebecca Davis, "Beauty as Compassionate Attention: Krzysztof Wodiczko's Repair of the World," *Arts 17* no. 2 (2005), 41.

[15] Solberg, *Compelling Knowledge*, 165.

[16] Solberg, *Compelling Knowledge*, 123.

Solberg argues that an epistemology of the cross, based on Martin Luther's theology of the cross, may direct North American Christians to where our knowing must stem from and where to seek future knowing in the call to live a morally responsible life.[17] Luther believed that as Christians, we must look to the cross to understand that God is not found within the image of a kingly and majestic Christ. God is found within the pitiful and weak image of Jesus dying on the cross. An epistemology of the cross demands we realize that through Jesus Christ, God entered into solidarity with the world[18] and suffered *with* us. In effect, the call to be Christ-like means we too must seek out those who are suffering in an attempt to help them bear their burden. We are called to be compassionate. We are called to *suffer together*. An epistemology of the cross leads us from "the observation that there is no neutral space to the conviction that [we] need to be accountable for which space [we are] occupying."[19]

North American Christians must seek out the knowledge of human suffering. We find this point in the basis of our faith for God incarnate, Jesus Christ, came to earth to share in human suffering. Also, throughout what we know of his life, Jesus consistently sought out the lesser among us. To be Christ-like and to follow in the footsteps of Jesus' most perfect example, American Christians must compassionately become one with the disenfranchised of the world. An epistemology of the cross, rather than an epistemology of glory, demands that we see the world in all of its ugliness. In the pitiful image of Jesus

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[17] Mary M. Solberg, "Notes Toward an Epistemology of the Cross," *Currents in Theology and Mission,* 24 Fall (1997), 8.

[18] Solberg, *Compelling Knowledge,* 134.

[19] Solberg, *Compelling Knowledge,* 134.

on the cross, we are able to see the evil that humans are capable of. We crucified the one person who was perfect and embodied absolute love. In response, Solberg's work demands that we concern ourselves with whom we are crucifying right now. Who needs to be taken down from their crosses, and have we put them there? An epistemology of the cross is full of accountability for both knower and knowee because these two are in a relationship with each other under God. They are "both subjects and objects."[20]

Often, North American Christians do not realize that God can be found within the imperfections of those perceived to be socially inferior. God is present in the oppressed and the impoverished, in those who have been nailed to their crosses. Returning to the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus says, "…just as you did it to the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me (Matthew 25:40 NRSV)." However, as the word compassion shows us, suffering cannot be ended from the outside. Rather, we must go and *share* in the suffering. As Jon Sobrino writes, "What God's suffering makes clear in a history of suffering is that between the alternatives of accepting suffering by sublimating it and eliminating it from the outside, we can and must introduce a new course, bearing it."[21] In this excerpt, I believe Sobrino is speaking of nothing more than Christian compassion.

According to Oliver Davies, compassion is the most intense form possible of intersubjectivity, or the "interweaving of self and other."[22] Using examples of responses

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[20] Solberg, *Compelling Knowledge*, 123.

[21] Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, trans. Paul Burns and Francis McDonagh (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993), 245-246.

[22] Oliver Davies, *A Theology of Compassion: Metaphysics of Difference and the Renewal of Tradition,* (SCM Press: London, 2001), xix.

to the Holocaust or other genocides, such as the ethnic-cleansing that occurred in Bosnia, Davies writes that when we react to the suffering of the other as if it were our own, that is compassion.[23] Compassion is an idea that transcends all relative synonyms such as mercy, pity, or sympathy for within the semantics these words and the connotations that surround them, suffering is not *shared*.[24] Charity is done in pity or sympathy. When information regarding the suffering of others is presented to us, we feel bad, maybe even a bit guilty, in our comfortable and excessive standard of living. However, charity never goes far enough in approaching the suffering of others. Rather, charity is a manner by which we keep the suffering of others at bay. We are simply able to write a check and shut our door, our consciences free of guilt once again. Ridding ourselves of the burden of the suffering by giving twenty dollars is not compassion, but the selfish, self-centered point-of-view that we, as people living in the United States, are entitled to what we have. By this standard, the malnourished, the sick, the dying, the hunted, those living in fear, and those living a life without hope, are also entitled to their "lot in life": the suffering that has become ubiquitous within their existence. I am not arguing against charity in general; it is a necessary aspect of our current world. But I believe the Christian faith calls us to do more.

Rather than looking at God as a merciful God, it is more accurate to understand God as compassionate. As Donald P. McNeill, Douglas A. Morrison, and Henri J.M. Nouwen write in their book *Compassion*, "The mystery of God's love is not that he takes

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[23] Ibid.

[24] Ibid., 232.

our pains away, but that he first wants to share them with us."[25] God does not solve our problems, but is the spirit that moves within us as we face the tribulations of life.[26] In the same sense, Jesus is God's compassion made visible.[27] In fact, whenever we invoke Christ's love as "Immanuel," we are proclaiming that "God is with us," and rejoicing that God is sharing in our suffering, for there is nothing more powerful or helpful in facing hardship than another's presence. Through the incarnation, God freely entered human history, recognizing our suffering, our emptiness, and "affirming us compassionately in the fullness of who we might we become."[28] To be compassionate is to see another's potential, and to realize one's own.

How do we act compassionately? Davies sees compassionate action as a series of three steps: (1) We feel another's distress; (2) we are moved by it; (3) we actively seek to remedy it.[29] Of course it is not possible to end suffering in every situation, and perhaps not even in most situations. What is most important, however, is that we are *active* in that pursuit, entering into solidarity with the suffering, taking on a burden, and expending energy in subversive defiance of injustice. This is all done in acknowledgement of our shared humanity.

Compassion is not easy, nor is it piecemeal. Rather, compassion is a way of living; it pervades our every breath and action. The burdens on the backs of those in the

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[25] Donald P. McNeill, Douglas A. Morrison and Henri J.M. Nouwen, *Compassion,* (Double Day and Company, Inc.: Garden City, NY, 1982), 18.

[26] *Ibid.,* 14.

[27] Ibid., 15.

[28] Davies, 273.

[29] Ibid., 18.

Third World are not light, and to attempt to understand their situation is to place a burden on one's own shoulders, and to suffer alongside them. Also, a compassionate life calls for us to ignore our own self-interest at times and to put ourselves in the uncomfortable situation of realizing our life of privilege, seeking to remedy the suffering of those not born into the predominantly white, middle-class "nobility" of the United States. In fact, "compassion asks us to go where it hurts, to enter into places of pain, to share in brokenness, fear, confusion, and anguish."[30] The compassionate life is a life together in the face of so much suffering.[31] It was the life of Jesus of Nazareth and is, or rather should be, the Christian life.

Daniel M. Bell, Jr. helps us understand the relationship between the suffering of the Third World and the lives of North Americans. Drawing on a background in liberation theology, Bell would call this relationship a *causal* relationship. Our sins cause the suffering of others, and they are the primary reason we find Christ in the cross, for God came to earth to bear away our suffering.[32]

Much of the suffering that pervades the Third World is the result of a lack of ethical concern by the citizens, businesses and governments of developed countries. Moe-Lobeda believes that people have been redefined as *homo consumens*, as the social good we are urged to partake in is "economic growth fueled by ever-increasing consumption."[33] This single-minded focus on economic growth harms more justice-

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[30] McNeill, Morrison, and Nouwen, 4.

[31] Ibid., 50.

[32] Daniel M. Bell, Jr., "Sacrifice and Suffering: Beyond Justice, Human Rights, and Capitalism," *Modern Theology* 18:3 July (2002), 351.

[33] Moe-Lobeda, *Healing a Broken World*, 66.

oriented approaches to economics, such as sustainability and community welfare. In effect, the governments of developed nations, and the multi-national corporations they sometimes act on behalf of, disregard all ethical concerns in the search for maximum profit. The infamous Enron, and its relationship with the U.S. government, would be a perfect example of this.

As Douglas John Hall writes, North Americans have an aversion to connecting sin to the arms race, rampant consumerism, and environmental degradation. These issues go hand in hand with our "greatest achievements": technological superiority, power, and a successful financial system.[34] However, these things are indeed sinful as they not only cause the suffering of others, but become the false gods of American society. To Hall, North American Christians all too often believe in the idea of "divine justice."[35] For example, many North American Christians still believe we justify ourselves by works. We are good people because of the charity we do, while the poverty or suffering of others must be attributed to their sinfulness.[36] If I am rewarded for the good I do, then the other must be punished for his or her evil. The suffering of Third World countries becomes the result of God's righteous judgment, or "divine justice," while all that North American Christians can do on their behalf is evangelize and pray. Our sinful actions do not cause the suffering of people in the Third World; rather, their own sins implicate them before God, and all we can do is pray for their conversion to righteousness. The idea of God's involvement in the suffering of "third world" citizens, rather than a causal and sinful

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[34] Douglas John Hall, *God & Human Suffering: An Exercise in the Theology of the Cross*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986), 78.

[35] Ibid., 77.

[36] Ibid.

human involvement, leads us away from Luther's truest revelation: that we are justified by faith alone.

To turn from a theology of "justification by works" and toward one of "justification by faith," North American Christians must understand the causal human relationship between one's own actions and the suffering of others. We must understand the role of human sin within the world, and we must be willing to recognize our implication in it as well as our responsibility as Christians. The cause of liberation is best served by people evaluating and changing their own lives in response to the "acceptance of responsibility for causing and benefiting from the oppression of others."[37] We must attempt not to be "self turned in on self" anymore, concerned only with our own works and our own well-being. Rather, with Christ's transforming love inside of us, we turn toward God in trust, and our neighbor in love.[38]

So what does a theology of the cross teach us? Sobrino writes, "Christian spirituality is the spirituality of a crucified love."[39] Once more, we turn to the example of Jesus Christ and God's unconditional love for humankind. Jesus of Nazareth did not ask to suffer, but he bore the burden that was put upon his shoulders. So, too, we must take up our own crosses. This is surely not an attempt to seek out our own suffering. Rather, we seek the suffering people of this world "in the hope of healing and reconciliation."[40]

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[37] Solberg, *Compelling Knowledge,* 107.

[38] Moe-Lobeda, 86.

[39] Jon Sobrino, "Spirituality and the Following of Jesus", in *Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology,* ed. Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), p. 694.

[40] Bell, 352.

As North American Christians move toward solidarity with the oppressed of this world, we hope to help them take themselves down from the crosses we have nailed them to and to stop the sinful practices that put them there. Individually, we may not succeed; however, solidarity calls for us to be compassionate and present.

I believe the key to the connection between knowledge and action is to recognize our own involvement. If we are involved in an action, then we are responsible for its outcome. We have played a role in what has occurred and helped make the situation possible. As Solberg writes, we have helped create our reality.[41] As I have observed, our actions affect those of other nations. The way we move within our U.S. reality affects the conditions of millions of impoverished people. We know that. Since we have helped to create that reality, we must seek to change it. The knower is not innocent.

If we are involved in what causes another's suffering, we are accountable. If we know of the suffering of another, we are accountable. The poverty of the `indigenous peoples of Guatemala, the starvation in Nicaragua, and the inhumanity of the current situation with immigration are all our messes. Are we going to clean them up, or just point our fingers at foreign governments, the "laziness" of poor people, or maybe, if we are feeling rebellious, our own government? At what point do we look at our own lives? At what point do we understand our own implication?

In the next section we turn to Martin Luther as an example of a Christian who understood the social demands of the Christian life. Luther consistently used his theology to critique the manner in which he and other Christians lived. Beyond that, Luther was a subversive social radical who constantly critiqued emerging unjust practices

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[41] Solberg, *Compelling Knowledge*, 125.

of his time. As a Christian and as a human, Luther fully understood the implications that the suffering of others had on his life.

Luther: The Social Radical

God makes love to our neighbor an obligation equal to love to himself."[42]--Martin Luther

The life and writings of Martin Luther demonstrate the manner in which Christians are called to act socially. Luther was more than a theological radical; he was also a social radical. His theological insights led him to act in the world. His writings on politics, social problems, and economics are filled with the connections he made. In this section, I will use Luther as an example for the active nature in which Christians are called to respond to suffering.

My intentions for using Luther, however, must be noted. The following is not intended to be an exhaustive historical or theological analysis of Luther. Rather, I am using Luther because he was inarguably an incredibly influential Christian theologian whose writings and ideas are still quite significant to modern North American Protestant thought. Therefore, as we analyze briefly the manner in which Luther's theology challenged him to act socially, a respected example is given of the connections between theological thought and social action. Surely, Luther's actions were not perfect, as any study of the Peasants War or his writings on the Jews will conclude. However, I hope the following brief discussion of Luther's writings on an emerging economic system, his

[42] Martin Luther, "Sermon on the 4th Sunday after the Epiphany," in Lenker, 7:68-69.

critiques of the brotherhoods, and his support for a community chest to help the poor will display the social implications of Luther's theology.[43]

When word spread throughout Germany of Luther's doctrine of justification by faith, the theological ramifications were endless. No longer did people have to worry about whether they were *doing* enough to receive God's grace. Nor did Christians need to worry about what works would bring them closer to heaven, what works would add to their years in purgatory, or how much an indulgence cost. There is no doubt that Luther was a theological radical. However, when I think of justification by faith alone in the context of Luther's times, the social ramifications are more prominent. If Christians were justified by their faith alone, no longer did they need to worry about whether the Church considered them saved. As Walter Altmann writes, "[Luther's] discovery undermined an ecclesiastical system that was imposing on the people multiple burdens of conscience and financial tribute, of which the sale of indulgences was only one."[44] Politically, justification by faith became the secular protest of the German nation against the outside influence of the Vatican and Rome, while also destabilizing the ecclesiastical exploitation of local and national governments.[45]

Clearly, Luther's theological work had a social power. However, did his theological work lead to social action? This is the question that is of the utmost importance to the present work, for if Luther's theology and system of beliefs caused him

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[43] For a more extensive analysis of Luther's social activity see the following : Walter Altmann, *Luther and Liberation: A Latin American Perspective,* trans. by Mary Solberg, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992)

[44] Altmann, 37.

[45] Ibid.

to voice concern and criticize social models that led to the disenfranchisement of some citizens, so too should our theology invigorate us to do the same.

Economically, Luther had much to say. Consider the following from "Trade and Usury":

> …[T]here are some who have no conscientious scruples against selling goods on time and credit for a higher price than if they were sold for cash. Indeed, there are some who will sell nothing for cash but everything on time, so they can make large profits on it. Observe that this way of dealing—which is grossly contrary to God's word, contrary to reason and every sense of justice, and springs from sheer wantonness and greed—is a sin against one's neighbor; for it does not consider his loss, but robs and steals from him that which is his. The seller is not trying to make a modest living, but to satisfy his lust for profits. According to divine law he should not sell his goods at a higher price on the time payment plan than for cash.[46]

The nature of Luther's argument here is incredibly religious. In fact, it is a blatant appeal to Christian sensibilities and beliefs, as well as to reason and justice. To Luther, our secular lives cannot be separated from the divine. Therefore, it is sinful to act only for oneself in economic life without considering the well-being of one's neighbor. As Moe-Lobeda notes, Christian love is manifest in all things. Therefore, economic life is not just a field of rational decisions toward self-welfare or profit. Rather, love should be present in economic life just as it is in every other aspect of the Christian life.[47] Concerning "Trade and Usury," Luther considers a "time" or credit system sinful for three reasons. First, a credit system does not consider the well-being of the buyer, for to Luther it is simply a tool for maximizing profit for the seller. This theme of putting one's neighbor before oneself is recurrent in Luther's more social writings. We might consider

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[46] *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehman (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955), Vol. 45: 261-262. Cited hereafter as *LW*.

[47] Ibid., 253.

it the "spirit" of Luther's social teachings. The second criticism of the credit system is that the seller wants for more than a "modest living" while the third is a "lust" for profits. These are abhorrent to Luther's theology because social acts should be actions of service toward neighbor rather than a means for personal gain.[48] In Luther's view, to make more than a "modest living" would be done at the expense of one's neighbor, something that cannot be reconciled with Christian service.

Altmann notes the context in which Luther's *Trade and Usury* was developed. In 1524, Germany was transitioning from a feudalistic system to an economic system that more closely resembles our own. Trade, diversification, city development, and a reliance on money all increased as princes, merchants, and the social elite all sought more profit from their endeavors.[49] Luther ultimately concludes that one cannot be a good Christian while seeking maximum profit as a tradesperson at the same time.[50] The secular, economic life cannot be separated from the sacred, religious life.

What is now called the law of supply and demand was also of great concern to Luther because he believed the prices of needed commodities should be fixed so as to prevent commercial exploitation.[51] If the need of a product is high, increased demand will cause the price of the product to increase as well. Therefore, a needed product potentially becomes too expensive to afford for those who need it, while the producer makes a large profit off of each item sold. Luther writes:

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[48] Ibid., 252.

[49] Altmann, 104.

[50] Ibid.

[51] Ibid., 105.

> Among themselves the merchants have a common rule which is their chief maxim and the basis of all their sharp practices, where they say: "I may sell my goods as dear as I can." They think this is their right. Thus occasion is given for avarice, and every window and door to hell is opened. What else does it mean but this: I care nothing about my neighbor; so long as I profit and satisfy my greed, of what concern is it to me if it injures my neighbor in ten ways at once? There you see how shamelessly this maxim flies squarely in the face not only of Christian love but also of natural law. How can there be anything good then in trade? How can it be without sin when such injustice is the chief maxim and rule of the whole business? On such a basis trade can be nothing but robbing and stealing the property of others.[52]

Once again, Luther is concerned with the Christian call to love one's neighbor. To Luther, to profit at the expense and health of one's neighbor is absolutely sinful. As Altmann points out, "[Luther's] economic views are radically centered in the basic needs of the people, not in profit making. In fact, he saw a permanent conflict between these two."[53] The search for excessive profit becomes once more "self turned in on self," while the needs of one's neighbors are forgotten. The question becomes, "what can I do for myself?" and not "what must I do for my neighbor?" To Luther, this was irreconcilable with the Christian call of absolute love and service to one's neighbor. To be "good" in the eyes of God, Luther believed economics must be a science of service rather than personal gain.[54] Prophetically, Luther may have realized that profit had the potential to become the false god it has become in North American culture.

It would be faulty to assume that Luther's thoughts on economics could be applied directly to our modern system. As mentioned above, Luther was writing during a

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[52] *LW* 45:247.

[53] Altmann, 111.

[54] Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, "Globalization in Light of Luther's Eucharistic Economic Ethics", *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* Volume 32, Number 3, Fall (2003), 252.

time when the medieval feudal system was changing into what we might call a rudimentary version of the modern economic system. In effect, Luther could be viewed more as a conservative pro-feudalist than a progressive anti-capitalist.[55] However, my point in discussing Luther's economic writings is not to laud him as an incredibly progressive economic theorist. My point is to connect the manner in which Luther's theology caused him to critique the emerging economic system because of the social inequities caused by the new economic system because it is evident that "Luther's great concern…" in his writings on economics "…was for justice and equity in the economic sphere."[56] Also, I want to show the subversive nature of Luther's social teachings as an appeal to North American Christians to raise their voices and become pronounced in their critiques of modern political, social, and economic systems. (*check out the article in booklet about subversive Christianity!!)*

Beyond general writings on economics, Luther also did a great deal of work on establishing a system of poverty relief in Wittenberg. I will begin with the theological elements of Luther's work on poor relief and move into how he influenced Wittenberg's city council. Starting as early as Luther's *Ninety-Five Theses* we see his dedication to the poor. In Thesis forty-three Luther writes, "Christians are to be taught that he who gives to the poor or lends to the needy does a better deed than he who buys indulgences."[57] An indulgence being a release from the punishment of sin, it is clear that Luther valued two

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[55] Moe-Lobeda, "Globalization in Light of Luther's Eucharistic Economic Ethics," 253.

[56] Walther I. Brandt in the introduction to Luther's "Trade and Usury," *LW, 45:* 238.

[57] *LW* 31:29.

things in particular. First, humans are justified by faith and grace alone. There is nothing we can "do" to "achieve" God's divine grace and love; rather, they are free gifts. Second, Luther sees concern for neighbor as being more important than concern for oneself. The buying of indulgences, though sometimes used for family members, is a selfish act. It is "self curved in on self." Concerning oneself with the problems of one's neighbor is a *selfless* act. It is putting one's neighbor before oneself.

Luther was also highly critical of the brotherhoods of laymen which were originally intended for charitable and devotional acts, but by Luther's time the brotherhoods' purpose was soteriological only.[58] One such Brotherhood promised members "6,455 masses, 3,550 entire Psalters, 200,000 rosaries, and 200,000 Te Deums."[59] The self-centered emphasis on personal salvation of the brotherhoods angered Luther. He writes, "The brotherhood is also supposed to be a special convocation of good works; instead it has become a collecting of money for beer."[60] More importantly, however, is the idea that Luther points toward acts for one's neighbors as what a Christian should be doing. In "To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation" Luther writes the following:

> …[I]n your baptism you have entered into a brotherhood with Christ…and with all Christians on earth. Hold fast to this and live up to its demands and you will have all the brotherhoods you want…Compared with the true brotherhood in Christ those brotherhoods are like a penny compared with a gulden. But if there were a brotherhood which raised money to feed the poor or to help the needy, that

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[58] Carter Lindberg, '"There Should Be No Beggars Among Christians'*:* Karlstadt, Luther, and the Origins of Protestant Poor Relief," *Church History* Vol. 46, Spring (1977), 316.

[59] This specific brotherhood was called the Brotherhood of 11,000 Virgins and originated in Cologne. See Ibid., 316.

[60] *LW* 35:68.

> would be a good idea. It would find its indulgences and merits in heaven. But today nothing comes of these groups except gluttony and drunkenness.[61]

Luther seems to have believed that a "brotherhood in Christ" would be concerned with the well being of one's neighbor, rather than a self-serving concern for salvation. In relation to the brotherhoods, it would be false to assume "…that their brotherhood is to be a benefit to no one but themselves."[62] So it is with our own lives. The Christian role in this world is to concern ourselves with our neighbor, especially when our neighbor is in need. Also, as Lindberg points out, Luther is writing on the topic of poor relief in response to a general lack of concern for the large numbers of impoverished in Germany. Luther sees a social evil such as poverty, (it is estimated that up to thirty percent of the population were paupers and vagrants[63]) and his theology demands that he respond.

Luther's concern for the poor led him to work on reforming relief efforts in Wittenberg. As Lindberg notes, there has been much debate over how much of a role Luther played in Wittenberg's reform. However, Lindberg contends that Luther played a large part indeed, even more so than Andreas Karlstadt, who is often seen as playing the more vital role in instituting a system of poverty relief.

We can see some of Luther's thoughts on the practical measures for poverty reform in the next passage which is another response to the brotherhoods:

> …they should gather the money which they intend to squander for drink, and collect it into a common treasury, each craft for itself. Then in cases of hardship, needy and fellow workmen might be helped to get started, and be lent money, or a

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[61] *LW* 44:193.

[62] *LW,* 35:69.

[63] Lindberg, 317.

> young couple of the same craft might be fitted out respectably from this common treasury…Then blessing would follow: a general fund would be gathered, whereby material aid too could be given to other persons.[64]

The "general fund" that Luther calls for in the previous writing is very similar to the common chest for poor relief enacted by the Wittenberg City Council on January 24, 1522. Also set in place was a system of accessible and low-interest loans for workers and artisans and educational grants for the children of poor families.[65] Furthermore, after harsh criticisms by Luther and others, the practice of excessive religious endowments was stopped and the leftover funds were put into the common chest.[66] However, what was Luther's role in all of this?

It is difficult to decipher Luther's exact role in the institution of a common chest by the Wittenberg City Council, though we have seen Luther's thoughts on the matter. Without a doubt, in his writings Luther endorsed greater care for the poor and the institution of programs that gave workers and young families a chance to work their way out of poverty.[67] As Lindberg points out, Luther played a strong role in the social implementation of poverty relief. This can be seen in his influence on the *Beutelordnung*, which was an "elaboration" on the Wittenberg Order.[68] A manuscript of the *Beutelordnung* was found with "corrections and additions in Luther's own hand."[69]

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[64] LW 35:69-71.

[65] Lindberg, 322.

[66] Ibid., 323.

[67] In terms of these loans from the treasury I am reminded of the modern system of micro-loans which has been successful in some impoverished communities.

[68] Lindberg, 326.

[69] Ibid.

Also, the principles set in place by the *Beutelordnung*, such as the common chest, were directly in line with Luther's thoughts on the subject. A year after the Wittenberg Order, Luther helped the city of Leisnig enact a common chest for poverty relief. All the town's citizens, including clergy[70], were called to give money to the chest every year.[71]

It is clear that Luther's theology caused him to speak out socially. For example, in "Trade and Usury," Luther's primary concern was theological in nature, "to instruct the Christian conscience."[72] This, in turn, demanded that he speak about relevant issues, such as the inequity of the emerging economic system. Through writings and active participation in social dialogue, Luther influenced and attempted to remedy what he saw as both a human and religious evil: poverty.

> [Luther] was the theologian and pastor who laid upon the heart of Christian hearers the uncompromising demands of God, and upon the hearts of statesmen and merchants the practical necessity for unselfishly seeking the ends of equity for all men [*sic*].[73]

This is an example we can live by. Luther was a man whose faith demanded accountability. To Luther, the government was accountable, the people were accountable, and he was accountable. As Christians who continue to live in the spirit of Luther's reformation, we must consider our own accountability.

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[70] Luther was adamant about this, calling for tax exemptions for the clergy to be renounced. See "Letter to the Council of the City of Stettin,' (January 11, 1523), *LW* 49:27.

[71] Lindberg, 334.

[72] Walther I. Brandt in the introduction to Luther's "Trade and Usury," *LW, 45:* 239.

[73] Ibid.

Luther, Neighbor, and the Indwelling Christ

Moe-Lobeda believes that an idea she terms the "indwelling Christ" is crucial to understanding Luther's views on Christian duty to our neighbor. Essentially, the indwelling presence of Christ is God's most perfect love coming from within us and acting out in neighbor love. "The indwelling Christ, mediated by practices of the Christian community, gradually changes it toward a manner of life that actively loves neighbor by serving the neighbors' well-being in every aspect of life."[74] How important was the "indwelling Christ" to Luther's social teachings? To Moe-Lobeda, it was the cornerstone of Luther's writings on economic and social life and absolutely essential to Luther's social commentary.[75] To continue, let us explore Luther's theological basis for the "indwelling Christ."

Luther believed that through the Holy Spirit, God comes within us. The Word not only became incarnate in Jesus Christ, but also becomes incarnate in the believer's heart, mind, and soul. In essence, God breathes with us, acts within us, and speaks through us. Luther writes in his "Third Sermon on Pentecost Sunday":

> God and man will cleave unto each other as friends, for the Holy Spirit himself prepares the heart of man and consecrates it as a holy house and dwelling, a temple and dwelling-place of God… Great glory and grace is this for men, that they are accounted worthy of being such an honored dwelling, castle, hall, yes, Paradise and kingdom of heaven, in which God dwells upon earth.[76]

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[74] Moe-Lobeda, "Globalization in Light of Luther's Eucharistic Economic Ethics", 253.

[75] Moe-Lobeda, *Healing a Broken World,* 88.

[76] Luther, in *Sermons of Martin Luther,* 3: 315.

Our God is a *compassionate* God. Inside of us all, God shares within our suffering souls. To Luther, one did not have to look up to search for God. Rather, the believer simply had to look within herself and into the eyes of another. As Paul writes, "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?...For God's temple is holy and you are that temple (I Corinthians 3:16-17 NRSV)." However, how does the indwelling Christ work outward?

To answer this question, we look once more to Luther. Luther believed that as God works within us, we "make daily progress in life and good works."[77] As I will expand upon later, this is not to say that we *work* toward grace for the grace of God has already been freely given. True faith, however, invites God into the heart where Christ dwells and works outward. In the same sermon, Luther continues:

> …[One who has God dwelling within his or her heart] is useful to God and man; through him and because of him men and countries receive benefit…he is a man through whom God speaks, in whom he lives and works, and such a man's words, life and doings are God's.[78]

The indwelling Christ is not about gaining our personal relationship with God because grace has already been bestowed upon the believer. Rather, the indwelling Christ is about God working within our relationships with our neighbors and our world. From within, Christ's love works outward. Luther sometimes called this, "Faith active in love," which signified that "…in faith man receives God's love and passes it on to his

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[77] Ibid., 3: 317.

[78] Ibid.

neighbor."[79] We are not called to complacently dwell in God's love; rather, we are called to *actively* love our neighbor. We are called to love.

Moe-Lobeda interprets the indwelling Christ as the believer not only becoming an object of God's love, but also becoming a subject of that love. God dwelling within us is "Faith in Christ" and "Faith of Christ."[80] This faith, when put within the love, structure, and practices of the Christian community, produces within us love for our neighbors.[81] We are not working toward Christ's love. Rather, Christ's love *transforms* us. Moe-Lobeda is very careful with this point, noting that though the indwelling Christ does, in essence, bring us to the divine, "…it is not the means of our justification, but rather the result."[82] The indwelling Christ is a gift bestowed upon justification, as God seeks to make our love into Christ's complete and transcendent love.[83]

Moe-Lobeda concludes that the indwelling Christ turns the Christian outward, away from "self turned in upon self," and toward our neighbor. In fact, to Moe-Lobeda this is true freedom, for we are turned to God in trust, and our neighbor in love.[84] With God's love within us, we turn that redemptive love toward neighbor as we are called to be Christs to one another.[85] Touching upon the discussion of works versus faith, Luther

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[79] George Wolfgang Forell, *Faith Active in Love,* (New York: The American Press, 1954), 100.

[80] Moe-Lobeda, *Healing a Broken World,* 74.

[81] Moe-Lobeda, *Healing a Broken World,* 74.

[82] Moe-Lobeda, *Healing a Broken World,* 76.

[83] Moe-Lobeda, *Healing a Broken World,* 76.

[84] Moe-Lobeda, *Healing a Broken World,* 86.

would say that a Christian whose faith is not followed by good works does not truly believe.[86] We are called to *share* in one another's suffering. We are not seeking a burden to put on ourselves, but rather to lessen the burden of another's suffering while growing into solidarity with the lesser among us. With the indwelling Christ inside of us, we seek to take people down from the crosses to which our society has nailed them.

A Redefinition of Neighbor

My contention is that today's globalized world calls for Christians to redefine the word "neighbor" and to whom it refers. In the United States, "neighbor" traditionally refers to the person who lives next door to us. By this definition, we are called simply to love Bob's family to the left and Cynthia's family to the right. Obviously, this does not go far enough. Neighbor, however, can be extended to anyone who lives near us. This, at least, encompasses the entire block or apartment complex in which we live. However, just as simply loving our next door neighbor does not go far enough, loving only those who settle near us cannot be reconciled with even the most narrow view of Christian ethics. In my experience, Jesus' call to "love one's neighbor" was extended by pastors, teachers and other respected persons to all of those we come across in our day-to-day lives. My classmate was just as much "neighbor" as the homeless person I walked by on the street. In this manner, and by this definition of "neighbor," I was called to love.

Moe-Lobeda writes that the issue which contributed to many of Luther's "faults" concerning social justice (the Peasants War, his writings on Jewish persons) can be directly attributed to a shifting definition of who one's neighbor actually is. "For Luther,

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[85] Moe-Lobeda, *Healing a Broken World,* 84.

[86] Forell, 89.

relegation of some to non-neighbor status crippled and betrayed the liberative, subversive, and compassionate power of the indwelling Christ…"[87] Obviously, the question of who is our neighbor is absolutely essential to the question of who will receive our compassion and our love. Using Luther's perceived shortcomings as an example, it is necessary that North American Christians have a definition of neighbor which does not limit our compassion or set limits on our love. This redefinition is for our own sake just as much as it is for our potential neighbors' sake. However, before we discuss the proposed redefinition of neighbor, it is necessary to analyze what neighbor-love entails.

According to Gene Outka, neighbor-love is intended for three things: first, "conscious life in relation to God" is promoted; second, the neighbor is helped with material needs; third, the neighbor's human freedom is respected.[88] Stephen J. Pope notes that *Agape*, or what we might call Christian love, acknowledges every human's personal dignity and their indelible worth.[89] This emphasis on dignity and worth can be seen as the basis for Christian inter-personal compassion. Just like Rebecca Davis, who looked into eyes of the homeless person and realized their shared humanity, neighbor-love seeks to break down the social barriers that separate us. Compassionate neighbor-love is an acknowledgement of shared humanity. It is the recognition that the suffering among us, because of our shared worth and dignity, deserve the uplifting strength of a community inundated with the social nature of God's most divine and transcendent love.

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[87] Moe-Lobeda, *Healing a Broken World,* 98.

[88] Gene Outka, *Agape, An Ethical Analysis*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 263-267.

[89] Stephen J. Pope, "Love in Contemporary Christian Ethics," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 23, Spring (1995), 168.

Stephen Post contends that in recent scholarship on the purpose of neighbor-love there has been too much emphasis on the freedom and material welfare of our neighbor, rather than "bringing the neighbor to the divine."[90] Post writes that "…there is not [*sic*] true human happiness for the neighbor that is not simultaneously profound love for God."[91] Ultimately, according to Post, if neighbor-love does not include bringing the neighbor to the divine, it is an inadequate version of Christian love and at times cannot be distinguished from secular ethics.[92] Criticizing Liberation Theology, Post argues that experiencing the divine within human relations, such as experiencing Christ among the oppressed, reduces the human encounter with God from "a unique human-divine meeting to a human-human meeting cloaked in theological garb."[93] To Post, God is an agonizing God who needs human love, and we are to turn our neighbor's love toward God for God's sake.[94]

As Luther points out, however, God does not need anything from us. Rather, as stated above, we are to turn our love toward neighbor. Luther writes, "God having no need for our works and benefactions for Himself, bids us to do for our neighbor what we would do for God." [95] This is not for the sake of conversion, but because Christ is found within our neighbor. As Jesus says in the Gospel of Matthew, to feed our neighbor is to

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[90] Stephen Post, "The Purpose of Neighbor Love," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 18, Spring (1995), 181.

[91] Ibid.

[92] Ibid.

[93] Ibid., 186.

[94] Ibid., 190.

[95] Luther, Comm. on Isaiah, 1527-1530, as found in Forell, 108.

feed God -- to *actively* love our neighbor is to *actively* love God. God does not need us to love God, but God does call us to love.

Furthermore, a neighbor-love that is more focused on love for God creates a system of "We will pray for them," rather than "Let us compassionately be with them now." A friend of mine's mother was recently in Haiti visiting various health clinics and small rural communities. As Nicole, my friend, later recounted to me, her mother, a Catholic, was appalled by the lack of social concern by some of the other women on the trip who were all of the same Protestant Church. The people of Haiti, living in the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere, suffer from malnutrition, lack of quality health care, and the sometimes hopeless disenfranchisement of living where there is no opportunity. As this group left one health clinic in particular, rampant with people dying from very curable diseases that do not affect North Americans, Nicole's mother listened to the other women on the trip discuss how all that they could do for these people is pray. They would not call their local representatives or senators; they would not call on their church to come into solidarity with this community; they would not question the social systems that allow for this extreme inequity to occur. What they would do, however, is to pray. Pray for a miracle from God, or maybe for someone else to do the work for them. This is not loving one's neighbor; this is allowing one's neighbor to suffer without an ounce of compassion. When the focus in neighbor-love is on the individual's love for God, rather than love for God both individually *and* through neighbor, the only thing we are called to do is pray.

Devaluing Christian social ethics also returns us to a system that focuses on heaven and life after death, rather than actively seeking justice on earth. If we are not called to

work with our neighbor to enter into a most-equitable worldly life, we are left concerning ourselves only with our own personal well-being and an arbitrary faith in God that has not truly transformed us. This is an ethic completely opposed to the teachings of Jesus, Paul, and Luther. As mentioned above, God's love comes within us, and is reflected outward. As Forell points out, Luther believed that if a work only benefits God, the saints, or oneself it is worthless.[96] Our works are to benefit our neighbor.

My final criticism of Post's work is that he does not consider places where the majority of the population is already Christian. In most of Latin America, for instance, the majority Christian population demands that our focus be on creating just social structures that help end the oppression, not on converting people to one's particular sect of Christianity. Ultimately, Christians should hope to influence spiritual conversions by the example we set as compassionate, loving humans, not by evangelization. To actively love one's neighbor is to be in touch with God and rooted in they way of Christ. This spiritual power is felt by all of those come into contact with.

Since we have briefly discussed the nature of neighbor-love and the proposals of its purpose, let us now return to the original point of this section: In a North American Christian context, who, exactly, are our neighbors? As discussed in the introduction, we are living in a globalized world. Our day-to-day actions –voting, jobs, consumption habits – reverberate across oceans and borders to affect the rich, the powerful, the oppressed, and the disenfranchised. For example, when North Americans bargain shop for the lowest price at the local Wal-Mart or Target, we are also instigating a "race to the bottom" for the cheapest labor possible among governments and corporations. The

[96] Forell, 103.

phrase “race to the bottom” signifies that governments will compete to lower restrictions and regulations on corporate activity that protect workers and the environment to continue to attract investment from multi-national corporations searching for the lowest cost of production. This phenomenon is not caused by the evil nature of corporations. Rather, it is the short-sighted and naïve nature of the North American consumer.

To combat the ill-effects of globalization, North American Christians must extend the circle of persons to whom the word “neighbor” refers. If we are called to love our neighbor, to combat the unjust nature of current economic, political, and social institutions “neighbor” must refer not only to those we come across in our day-to-day interactions, but also all of those affected by our lives. As mentioned above, the consequences of our actions or even of our inactions are ubiquitous. In response to the demands of our modern epoch, neighbor must encompass all to whom we are connected not only physically and spatially, but also through our actions and interactions. North American Christians must hold themselves accountable for the abused women in maquilas and the victims of genocide in Rwanda, Guatemala, and Darfur, for without compassionate reaction to the inhumane and the unjust we are absolutely complicit. In a globalized world, there is no such thing as neutrality. Just as we are affected by the “other,” our neighbors in the Two-Thirds World, they too are extremely affected by us. Therefore, North American Christians must seek to share in the suffering of so many of our global neighbors, while actively combating the systems that account for that suffering. Most importantly, we must look into ourselves and ask as Luther did, “Whom

does it benefit?"[97] If our actions are not to the benefit or our global neighbors, but rather to their detriment, we must reevaluate and change our actions.

Ultimately, the redefinition of neighbor demands that we consider the forced suffering of so many of our global neighbors. This is in stark contrast to a Christianity that asks us only to be there for our friends, family, and others we come into contact with throughout our lives. We are called to seek out our suffering neighbors, those whose inequitable fate is affected by our gluttonous consumerism, our ignorance, our ethnocentrism, and our selfish and self-centered government. We are called to no longer be ignorant of the level of suffering seen outside (and within) the United States' borders. We are called to enter into compassionate and *active* love with our neighbors; suffering with them and helping them carry the burden of their crosses in hopes of one day seeing them remove themselves from those very crosses. The suffering are our neighbors and as Christians we must *be there* for them.

Conclusion

Recently, my father and I watched my mother perform a Cantata with our church's choir which portrayed a modernist take on the life and death of Jesus Christ. A church member acting as Luke guided us through his version of Christ's story. Toward the end, during the crucifixion of Jesus, "Luke" spoke of the horrible, torturous, and unending pain afflicting Jesus. As we can only imagine, the pain of being crucified is almost incomprehensible in its magnitude. At this moment during the story, I am sure that most attendees were feeling compassionate. We moved into solidarity with Jesus'

[97] Martin Luther, found in Forell, 103.

suffering and cringed at the uncomfortable burden his suffering places upon us, just as Christ, by this action, moved into solidarity with humankind. My insides churning, I turned to my father and whispered, "This is why our church should have a discussion about Guantanamo Bay."

As Christians, the suffering of Jesus puts us in a unique spot for seeking out those who are suffering in this world. As we meditate on Jesus' human pain, we must also consider the torture victims of our own time. North American Christians must come into solidarity with "the disappeared" of Latin America, women such as Sister Dianna Ortiz, who was raped and tortured in Guatemala, the refugees of Darfur, and yes, even the accused terror suspects held unjustly at Guantanamo Bay. The most important manner in which Christ's story becomes the "Living Gospel" is if we bring the compassionate message of Jesus Christ into our own lives and *practice* the subversive manner in which Jesus lived.

Christianity is something to be practiced. More than just a theology, a world-view, or an explanation of humanity, Christianity is a way of life. Just as a Buddhist might meditate, a Christian is called to love and to act as Jesus did, ultimately living a life of service to neighbor and community. This is our meditation. Seen through the example of people like Mother Theresa, it is obvious that a life of *practicing* Christ's love and compassion for all beings only leads one to a fuller love, not to an empty spring. To be in the presence of a woman such as Mother Theresa, or the beautiful people I met in Central America – Fernando Cardenal, Sister Peggy O'Neil, Dora Maria Tellez, and the countless others who continue to fight the never ending battle for liberation – is to *feel* the Spirit moving and pulsating with life. As Christians, we do not live one hour a week for God

and the rest for ourselves; we live every minute for our neighbor because of God's justifying and loving grace.

Therefore, what *can* we do for our neighbor? This is the question we must constantly be asking ourselves, for to enter into compassionate solidarity with the world's suffering demands action. It is something we engage ourselves in as we *practice* the Christian life. Also, we must seek to understand and change the manner in which our lives as North Americans negatively affect our global neighbors. To *know* of the suffering of those in Third World countries as well as the disenfranchised and marginalized sections of our own society, is to implicate oneself. To implicate oneself is to seek to understand the effects of our day-to-day lives on our neighbors. As I have attempted to show, our lives as people in the United States reverberate globally. As Christians, we must ensure our influence is positive in nature by entering into compassionate love with our neighbors and seeking to end the processes and systems that cause global suffering.

The life and writings of Martin Luther give us an example of the subversive nature in which Christians are called to act in order to ensure the dignity of our neighbor. As Christians living in our current epoch, we must remember the reformative spirit that gave the Christian faith new life. Compassionately, lovingly, and with Christ dwelling inside of us, we receive God's never-ending love in faith and turn it toward our neighbor.

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