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Just Care for the Sick:
TennCare and the Disappearance of Ecclesial Justice

On May 28, 2005, the state of Tennessee chose to terminate health care coverage for over 200,000 of the 'sickest of the sick' (i.e. those with catastrophic illnesses, the uninsurable, the terminally and mentally ill, the poor and elderly) while significantly reducing health care benefits for another 500,000 persons (i.e. limiting doctor visits, prescriptions, and treatments, adding costly co-pays). Under the rationale of 'fiscal responsibility,' the state legislature passed democratic Governor Phil Bredesen's proposed budget containing far-reaching cuts to 'TennCare,' Tennessee's managed care insurance program for about 1.3 million persons who are impoverished, disabled, uninsured, uninsurable, mentally or terminally ill, etc. Although the University of Tennessee's Center for Health Services estimated that someone would die prematurely every 20 hours due to these cuts in health care coverage,[1] and despite various efforts by the Tennessee Justice Center, the Tennessee Health Care Campaign, the Nashville Peace and Justice Center, and a small number of concerned citizens to dissuade the executive, judicial, legislative, and public bodies from enacting these cuts, the state of Tennessee collectively ceased caring for the health needs of over two hundred thousand of its most vulnerable citizens with surprisingly little hesitation. Particularly disengaged were Tennessee's countless churches. Apart from a few letters written by ecclesial hierarchies to the Governor, a call to fasting and discernment during the season of Lent, a 'march on the capital' organized mainly by Memphis

[1] *'The Impact of Reducing TennCare Enrollment on Mortality Rates'* (The Center for Health Services Research, The University of Tennessee, Spring 2005).

African American clergy, and two or three sparsely attended clergy press conferences[2], the Christian 'witness' amidst this ominous public decision was largely either hidden disapproval, tacit support, or complete indifference.

For many of those who, as Christians, did seek to 'stop the cuts,' the convergence of this particular public action and ecclesial in-action *in Tennessee* is especially troubling. First of all, since its inception in the early 1990's, TennCare has been watched closely throughout the country as a test-case for other states to potentially follow in offering a more comprehensive, publicly-funded healthcare system, and therefore its perceived failure represents a significant setback to those committed to promoting society's collective responsibility in caring for the health needs of all persons. Secondly, since all of Tennessee's 'safety net' programs were combined under TennCare (as a cost-saving measure), those cut off from TennCare have been, in many cases, literally and finally *cut off* from any social support. Thirdly, Tennessee's move to so abandon its most vulnerable citizens, unprecedented in the United States since the advent of Medicare and Medicaid, is now serving as a model for other states, with Florida and Missouri, in particular, preparing to follow Tennessee's lead. Finally, because church attendance and participation is comparatively higher in Tennessee than in many other states and since its capital city, Nashville, serves as a kind of national center for numerous Protestant denominational boards and agencies, several Christian publishing houses, and the Christian music industry, the fact that Tennessee's churches, collectively speaking, offered almost no objection to the cuts to TennCare does not bode well for those hoping for a more vigorous ecclesial response in other parts of the country as far-reaching cuts to many state and federal entitlement programs are proposed in the coming years.

[2] At one of the clergy press conferences, an astute reporter from WPLN asked why there weren't more clergy present – an embarrassing question which none of the responders could adequately answer.

Of course, to even view this convergence of public action and ecclesial in-action as especially problematic seems to suggest a more 'liberal' or 'mainline' perspective, which already takes for granted not only that Christians ought to seek justice for the sick, especially those who are poor and vulnerable, but that they are to do so primarily by affirming and supporting government-run health care programs. Not surprisingly, in fact, the small number of Christians who did participate in efforts to stop the cuts were predominantly 'liberal' and/or 'mainline,' and the two foundational givens out of which most voiced their opposition were that Christians are mandated to seek justice and that justice is primarily realized or denied at the level of the civic community. Conversely, from the perspective of Tennessee's more 'conservative' churches, most of which do not believe that ensuring broad access to health care is a proper role for government, the cuts to TennCare were viewed primarily as a positive step toward reducing the size and reach of the 'welfare state.' Finally, for those 'sectarian' Christians who do not believe that the church ought to engage in the political process at all, the various public decisions which led to the disenrollment of over 200,000 persons from TennCare were simply not perceived to be a matter of ecclesial concern.

Given that my own perspective is shaped by my formation and participation in a 'mainline' denomination (United Methodist), by the theological training I have received at a 'liberal' divinity and graduate school (Vanderbilt), and by my sporadic involvement in efforts to prevent the cuts, the fact that I view the convergence of this particular public action and ecclesial in-action with alarm should not be surprising. However, unlike many of the 'progressive' or 'mainline' Christians with whom I held signs, organized, wrote letters, spoke out, etc., I have never assumed that the *only,* or necessarily even primary, way for Christians to do justice for the sick in this situation was to 'save TennCare.' *That* Christians are to seek justice for the sick,

especially those who are poor and vulnerable, I hold to be an essential, non-negotiable Christian mandate. Just exactly *how* justice is ultimately pursued by ecclesial communions, whether through civic engagement or not, seems to me to fall within what has often been deemed a matter of *adiaphora* – a matter of 'indifference', or a matter over which Christians can genuinely disagree and remain fundamentally united. Seen from this perspective, however, the pervasive in-activity of Tennessee's countless churches before and after the cuts to TennCare is even more disconcerting, because irrespective of the various ecclesial perspectives on *how* to do justice in this situation, the essential question of *whether* justice is being realized for Tennessee's sick and vulnerable can be answered – as a judgment upon *all* the churches – with a portentous 'No.'

In what follows, I will attempt to articulate more clearly not only why I believe a basic biblical understanding of justice requires that all Christians attend to the needs of the sick, particularly those who are poor and vulnerable, but also why this very understanding of justice allows for a charitable affirmation of multiple ecclesial perspectives on how to actually set about performing justice for the sick. More specifically, after clarifying the primary character of justice in the scriptures, I will show how four different ecclesial positions regarding health care – mainline, liberal, conservative, and sectarian – can each legitimately lay claim to the biblical shape of how to pursue justice. In so doing, I hope to draw attention away from what I perceive to be a matter of Christian adiaphora – precisely how the sick are to be cared for – and back toward the essential crisis at hand: that a significant percentage of Tennessee's poor and vulnerable simply do not have access to reliable health care and that, for the most part, neither the mainline nor liberal nor conservative nor sectarian churches seem to care.

Justice for the Sick: A Biblical-Theological View

> *"I am the Lord; I act with steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth, for in these things I delight" (Jeremiah 9:24).*

The full breadth and complexity of the biblical mandate to 'do justice' is comprehensible to the extent that one grasps not only how foundational 'justice' is throughout the Hebrew and Christian scriptures but also how intimately interconnected it is with other central and abiding biblical-theological themes. In fact, the rather odd phrase – 'justice for the sick' – is intelligible only as these various interconnections are made clear. In what follows, I will attempt to offer a brief survey of the biblical meanings of justice, while highlighting several interrelated theological, ethical, and social dimensions which show the intimate connections between the doing of justice, the sickness or health of persons, and the overall wellbeing of a society.

The two key Old Testament terms specifically related to justice, themselves closely related, are *mishpat* and *tsedeqah*. *Mishpat* is often translated as 'judgment' and refers most directly to the actions of a judge, law-giver or governor in deciding cases, executing the law, and settling legal, civil, political, or religious disputes. For example, the role of Moses (Ex. 18:13), the Judges (1 Ch. 17:10), and then the Kings of Israel is to judge among the people by giving the members of the community "a fair hearing" in deciding "rightly between one person and another" (Deut. 1:16). *Tsedeqah* translates as 'righteousness' or 'rightness,' which, in the most basic sense, simply refers to that which is right, honest, or accurate, so that the 'right' weights and measures are those which will ensure an honest system of trade (Deut. 25:15). Accordingly, *mishpat* and *tsedeqah* are often coupled together in depictions of justice, so that a judgment (*mishpat*) is just when it is decided rightly (*tsedeqah*). For example, the NRSV translates Deuteronomy 16:18-20 as:

> You shall appoint judges and officials throughout your tribes, in all your towns that the Lord your God is giving you, and they shall render just (*tsedeq*) decisions (*mishpat*) for the people. You must not distort justice (*mishpat*); you must not show partiality; and you must not accept bribes, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and

> subverts the cause of those who are in the right (*tsedeqim*). Justice (*tsedeq*), and only justice (*tsedeq*), you shall pursue.

Justice – understood as judging/discerning rightly – is central to the way in which the person and work of God is described in the Old Testament. The Psalmist depicts God as being seated "in the divine council" where "he holds judgment (*shapat*)" (Ps. 82:1); Jeremiah says that the Lord, who tries the whole life of a person, judges righteously (*shapat-tsedeq*) (11:20); and the Song of Moses affirms: "The Rock, his work is perfect, and all his ways are just (*mishpat*). A faithful God, without deceit, just (*tsadiq*) and upright is he" (Deut. 32:4). Closely related to the justice/judgment/righteousness of God in the Old Testament is the *hesed* of God, represented variously as 'mercy,' 'grace,' 'loyalty,' 'goodness,' 'loving-kindness,' and 'compassion.' The Lord who judges rightly, who discerns, decides, and acts righteously, is a God who is "merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love (*hesed*) and faithfulness" (Ex. 34:6). Along with various attributes related to 'holiness', affirmations of the *mishpat*, *tsedeqah*, and *hesed* of God, frequently listed together, constitute the foundational understanding of the nature and work of God throughout the Old Testament: "Righteousness (*tsedeq*) and justice (*mishpat*) are the foundation of your throne; steadfast love (*hesed*) and faithfulness go before you" (Ps. 89:14).

The essential context in which to understand the precise meaning of the divine attributes of justice and enduring goodness affirmed in the Old Testament is that of the covenantal relationship between God and Israel. God's righteous judgment and steadfast love are not only disclosed but given specific content within Israel's experience of God's faithfulness to the covenant between God and Israel. In the foundational event of the Old Testament narratives, the Exodus from Egypt, God is said to hear the groaning of the enslaved Hebrews and, remembering his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Ex. 2:24), commissions Moses to tell the people:

> `I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from their bondage, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great acts of judgment (*shapatim*), and I will take you for my people, and I will be your God; and you shall know that I am the LORD your God, who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians (Ex. 6:6-7).

Not only the nature of God's judgment but also the character of God's righteousness (Deut. 9:4) and enduring goodness (Ex. 15:13) are grounded in Israel's experience of God's faithfulness in liberating them from captivity and creating them as a people whose very identity is constituted by their covenant relationship with God. Referring specifically to the *tsedeqah* of God, Bruce C. Birch comments that "Yahweh's righteousness was not an abstract norm but was seen in God's concrete acts to establish and preserve relationship. For Israel this divine righteousness is known in God's actions to establish Israel in deliverance and preserve community in covenant."[3] Likewise, both the *mishpat* and *hesed* of God are "always demonstrated in the context of relationship, and most often in relation to the need of the other in relationship."[4] To summarize, for Israel, the definitive meaning of God's justice – of God's governing power to discern, decide, and act rightly – is known principally through the steadfast faithfulness of God in delivering the Hebrews from captivity to be a people upheld by God's enduring covenant relationship.

Precisely because divine justice/judgment/righteousness, as represented in the Old Testament, is fundamentally oriented toward the creation and preservation of community through faithful relationship, God's compassionate concern is especially directed toward those who are excluded from the relational supports received in community – the destitute, the needy, the hungry, the widow, the orphan, the alien, the weak, and the oppressed. God's righteousness is particularly manifest in working "vindication and justice (*mishpat*) for all who are oppressed" (Ps. 103:6), and the Lord "executes justice (*mishpat*) for the fatherless and the widow, and loves

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[3] Birch, Bruce C., *Let Justice Roll Down: The Old Testament, Ethics, and Christian Life* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1991), pg. 154.
[4] *Ib*., pg. 152.

the sojourner, giving him food and clothing" (Deut. 10:18), because it is the very nature of God's righteous judgment to deliver those excluded from community by seeking to restore them into the relational life of the community.

Finally, it is important to notice that, throughout the Old Testament, God's just activity in restoring those excluded from the relational life of a community is consistently described through images of healing and health. In freeing the Hebrew slaves from captivity and thereby creating the conditions by which they might be a people, Yahweh's activity is fundamentally depicted as that of a healer: "I am the Lord who heals you" (Ex. 15:26). The Psalmist declares that the God who works "justice for all who are oppressed" is the Lord "who heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the Pit" (Ps. 103:6, 3); the One who "lifts up the downtrodden" is the God who "heals the brokenhearted, and binds up their wounds" (Ps. 147:6, 3). In a well-known passage, the prophet Jeremiah likens the exilic community's longing for salvation to a hope for the restorative work of a physician: "For the hurt of my poor people I am hurt…Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of my poor people not been restored? (Jer. 8:21-22). Ultimately, the healing work of God's justice, which restores the weak and the needy to relationship in community, is directed toward what the Old Testament envisions as the peace (*shalom*) of God, a complete wholeness of life which includes the welfare and soundness of all persons, a shared abundance of those things necessary for life, and a dynamic friendship in all personal and social relationships. God's intentions are for the healing and wholeness of persons, rightly-related in a healed community of friendship, where the resources necessary for life are abundantly shared – an aim brought about by the steadfast nature and loving work of God's justice/judgment/righteousness.

As a people who understood themselves to have been created by the righteous judgments of a merciful God, and sustained through God's enduring relational faithfulness, Israel, in turn, believed its very identity to be shaped by the call to faithfully co-respond to the person and work of this relationally just God. In the establishment of their covenant relationship with God, Israel is charged to be "a priestly kingdom and a holy nation" (Ex. 19:6), in particular, by reflecting the righteousness judgments of God in its communal life. Remembering their own history with God – that at one time they were slaves but through God's righteous judgments were delivered and made into a people (Deut. 24:18) – Israel is instructed into the ways of living justly as a society: by avoiding bribes in communal decisions which distort right judgment (Deut. 16:19); in structuring economic practices so that the community's poor and vulnerable have food to eat (Deut. 24:19); by prohibiting the taking of interest (Ex. 22:25) or the withholding from the needy those items secured for debts (i.e. garments) which are necessary to their survival (Deut. 24:13); and in ensuring that the poor would not remain permanently enslaved in debt by canceling debts every seven years (Deut. 15:1) and rectifying all social inequalities every 50 years (Lev. 25). Again, the way of life that Israel is commissioned to embody reflects the righteous judgments of God, a justice which is especially oriented toward those whose very lives are threatened by exclusion and which thereby seeks to faithfully restore such persons to wholeness by ensuring their inclusion in the basic supports received in community.

Certainly one of the predominant and abiding themes of Israel's history as a nation is the realization, perversion, and expectation of justice/judgment/righteousness. The most celebrated of kings – King David – is said to have "administered justice (*mishpat*) and equity (*righteousness*) to all his people" (2 Sam. 8:15). Psalm 72, originally a coronation prayer, entreats God to bestow the king with God's own righteous judgment: "May he judge your people

with righteousness (*tsedeq*) and your poor with justice (*mishpat*)" (72: 2). The king's greatness is affirmed precisely because, like God's deliverance of the Hebrews from captivity, the king "delivers the needy when they call, the poor and those who have no helper…and saves the lives of the needy" (72:12-13). At the heart of the prophetic critique of Israelite society is the continual perversion of justice, especially in relation to the community's most vulnerable. Although God has maintained fidelity to the covenant relationship with Israel, the prophets declare, "there is no faithfulness or kindness (*hesed*), and no knowledge of God in the land" (Hos. 4:1). The God of steadfast love 'expected justice (*mishpat*)' but saw that the needy suffered violence, 'righteousness (*tsedeqah*)' but heard the poor cry out (Is. 5:7). The leaders of Israel, in particular, are judged because of their failures to maintain communal faithfulness to the poor and sick: "you have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured…but with force and harshness you have ruled them" (Ez. 34:4). And though the prophets interpret Israel's deportation into exile as God's righteous judgment upon a faithless people who had "made a covenant with death" (Is. 28: 15), nevertheless, as Hosea affirms, God will faithfully maintain covenant relationship with Israel "in righteousness (*tsedeq*) and in justice (*mishpat*), in steadfast love (*hesed*), and in mercy" (Hos. 2:19). Out of this trust in God's faithfulness arises Israel's hope for the coming messiah who will rule after the manner of King David in the everlasting *shalom* of God's communal kingdom.

> The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice (*mishpat*) and righteousness (*tsedeqah*) in the land (Jer. 23:5).
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> "Then a throne will be established in steadfast love (*hesed*) and on it will sit in faithfulness in the tent of David one who judges and seeks justice (*mishpat*) and is swift to do righteousness (*tsedeq*)" (Is. 16:5).
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> His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace (*shalom*) for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with

> justice (*mishpat*) and with righteousness (*tsedeqah*) from this time onward and forevermore (Is. 9:7).

Once again, many of the images used to describe the salvation brought by the messiah in the coming messianic kingdom are those of physical healing and health.

> Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy…Everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; and they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorry and sighing shall flee away (Is. 35:5-6, 10b).

> The sun of righteousness (*tsedeqah*) shall rise, with healing in its wings. You shall go forth leaping like calves from the stall (Mal. 4:2).

Of course, the foundational affirmation at the heart of Christian faith and life is that Jesus of Nazareth – in his earthly ministry and as the crucified, risen, and coming Lord – is the 'sun of righteousness,' messiah (the Christ). The gospel writers continuously portray the span of Jesus' life in the shape of Israel's messiah, as one who both announces and embodies the reign of God's steadfast love and righteous judgment. Mary's soul is magnified because, in Jesus, God has not forgotten God's promise of covenant faithfulness, but "in remembrance of his mercy" has "lifted up the lowly" and "filled the hungry with good things" (Lk. 1:52-55). Jesus' ministry begins, according to Luke, with his public reading of Isaiah, by which he announces the advent of God's justice: "the Spirit of the Lord is upon me…to bring good news to the poor…to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free" and to proclaim the rectification of all social inequalities in "the year of the Lord's favor" (Lk. 4:18-19). In the New Testament, the term most closely aligned with the Hebrew *tsedeqah* is the Greek word *dikaiosune*: Jesus counts among the blessed those who "hunger and thirst for righteousness (*dikaiosune*)" and those who are "persecuted for righteousness' (*dikaiosunes*) sake" (Matt. 5:6, 10); he urges his followers to "strive first for the kingdom of God and his justice (*dikaiosune*)" (6:33). And according to the witness of the New Testament narratives, the unique character of

God's righteous judgment, which delivers those excluded from participation in community through relational faithfulness, is fully enfleshed in Jesus – in the feeding of the hungry, the welcoming of children, and the sharing of table fellowship with tax collectors, prostitutes, and 'sinners.'

The inbreaking reign of God's righteous judgment, which works to restore those excluded from the wholeness of community, is precisely how the gospels construe the manifold healings in Jesus' ministry. To be sick, dis-eased, infirm, contagious, believing oneself unable to contribute and a burden to others, almost always entails, both as cause and/or effect, not only estrangement from one's own body but exclusion from full participation in communal life. And for the sake of ones such as these, the gospels affirm, Jesus has come – "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick" (Mk. 2:17). Luke's depiction of Jesus' encounter with a leper is an especially indicative example of the communally restorative and thereby just nature of Jesus' healings, because in this context, leprosy was innately linked to communal isolation. "The law required that a leprous person wear torn clothing and disheveled hair and live alone or with other lepers. When approached by another person, the leper was to cover his or her upper lip and call out 'Unclean, unclean.'"[5] Only after a period of quarantine, a successful ritual for cleansing, and an examination by a priest was one allowed to return to the community. Those who did not heal of their leprosy, consequently, were literally and permanently cut off from relational participation in society. Luke's exact language here is significant: "Jesus *stretched out his hand*, touched him, and said…'Be made clean' (5:13). Directly analogous to the righteousness of Yahweh who, "with an *outstretched arm* and with great acts of justice (*mishpat*)" (Ex. 6:6), delivers, redeems, and creates a people in relational faithfulness, Jesus reaches out, touches the leper who is in bondage to his disease and its

[5] *The New Interpreter's Bible: Volume 9, Luke and John* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), pg. 119.

isolating implications, and pronounces, or rather judges, him 'clean.' Moreover, in telling the man to go show himself to the priest, who will then mediate his return into the community, Jesus restores not only the man's body to himself but his whole person into society. In word and especially in deed, Jesus manifests the righteous judgment of God's reign, a justice which likewise shapes the mission of the disciples, who are given authority "to cure every disease and every sickness" (Matt. 10:1). Accordingly, when John's disciples are sent to inquire whether Jesus is the messiah, Jesus points to the curative justice of God's rule already present in their midst: "the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them" (Lk. 7:22).

Fundamental to Paul's thought as well is the 'righteous judgment of God,' a justice/judgment/righteousness which, in and through Jesus Christ, has restored fallen humanity into community with God. Though more universal in scope, Paul's understanding of God's 'righteous judgment' follows the basic movement of the exodus narratives. In Adam, according to Paul, humanity has excluded itself from community with God and become enslaved to sin, evil, and death, but through Christ's "act of righteousness (*dikaiomatos*)," humanity has been "judged righteous (dikaioumenoi)" (Rom. 5:18, 3:24) and therefore restored to relationship with God. All of this, moreover, is due to the grace, or the steadfast love and faithfulness, of God. "This is evidence of the righteous judgment [i.e. justice] of God, that you may be made worthy of the kingdom of God" (2 Th. 1:5). Accordingly, since God's justice in Christ has restored to communal relationship those who had cut themselves off from God, the authentic Christian life is one that reflects the righteous judgments of God. Paul urges Christians to "present your bodies therefore as instruments of justice (*dikaiosunes*)" (Rom. 6:13). Moreover, not only does God in Christ restore community between God and humanity, but literally 'in Christ' or in the

'body of Christ' (*ecclesia*), God reconciles isolated persons to each other in loving communion. It is for this reason that Paul warns that those who eat and drink the communal meal without discerning the bodies of the hungry and poor "eat and drink judgment against themselves" (1 Cor. 11:29) and why he affirms that those who give to the poor saints in Jerusalem will reap a "harvest of righteousness" (2 Cor. 9:10). For Paul, the righteous judgment of God creates and sustains the life of Christians in right/eous relationship with God and in just communal relations with one another.

To summarize: the purpose of this survey has been to provide a basic definition of biblical justice as *the redemptive purposes of God and the particular calling of God's people to faithfully maintain covenant relationship with those who are isolated and cut off by steadfastly working to restore them to wholeness through active inclusion and curative participation in the life of community*. In so doing, I have especially attempted to highlight particular interconnections in scripture between justice, sickness/healing, and community.

Whose Justice? Which Community?

Having clarified the scriptural grounds upon which I avow that the call to seek justice for the sick, especially the poor and vulnerable, is an essential, non-negotiable Christian mandate, it is now possible to see that the dominant ecclesial perspectives operative in Tennessee's churches are each aligned, though differently, with the basic shape of biblical justice. At least at the level of stated positions, the mainline, sectarian, liberal, and conservative churches affirm that the needs of the sick and vulnerable are to be cared for by way of relational faithfulness in community. The decisive question, as we will see, is precisely which 'community' – the civic or the ecclesial – is recognized as the primary locus in which to maintain relational faithfulness with the poor and needy.

Mainline: In general, the mainline churches (i.e. Catholic, Presbyterian, United Methodist, ELCA Lutheran, Episcopal) officially support a system of universalized health care, overseen by the federal government, to ensure that all citizens have access to safe, reliable, and affordable health care. For example, my own denomination of the United Methodist Church, in its *Book of Discipline*, states that because "health care is a basic human right" and "because it is unjust to construct or perpetuate barriers to physical or mental wholeness or full participation in community," United Methodists affirm "the role of governments in ensuring that each individual has access to those elements necessary to good health."[6] Moreover, all United Methodists are urged "to support *public policies and programs* that will ensure comprehensive health-care services of high quality to all persons [italics my emphasis]."[7] Clearly, the primary community in which justice for those needing health care is to be sought is the civic community.

Although identifying all of the historical sources which have influenced the mainline churches is beyond the scope of this essay, generally speaking, one can look to Augustine classically and Reinhold Niebuhr more recently as key theological voices which have shaped the mainline perspective. In the *City of God*, Augustine famously distinguishes between two kinds of cities, the 'earthly city' in which self-love, the lust for domination, and political coercion reign, and the 'heavenly city' in which love for God and fellowship with the saints and angels brings an enduring peace.[8] True justice, which is only possible in the community of God, is never realized in the earthly city, because in this city coercion and subjugation are integral in the governance of an unruly society.[9] Nevertheless, because the two cities are bound up one with the

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[6] *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2004), paragraph 162.T.
[7] *The Book of Resolutions of the United Methodist Church* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1996), resolution 109.
[8] *City of God* (London: Penguin Books, 1987), Book 14.28, pgs. 593-594.
[9] *Ib.,* Book 19.21, pgs. 881-883.

other in history, and since the heavenly city, while on pilgrimage in this life, needs to make use of the less-than-perfect 'peace' which the earthy city provides, the Christian community "has no scruples in conforming to the laws of the earthly city by which those things which are designed for the support of this mortal life are regulated."[10] Thus, even though the ultimate locus within which true justice will be realized is heavenly communion with God, the church in this life, under the conditions of history, supports and participates in the limited justice which the civic community sustains.

Reinhold Niebuhr's well known distinction between the law of love and the laws of justice follows upon this Augustinian framework. For Niebuhr, the highest and purest law of Christian faith is the law of love, which remains for Christians the relational ideal of complete generosity and utterly selfless regard for the other. However, because self-interest is so deeply and unavoidably entrenched in human life, even within the lives of the 'redeemed,' the law of love "does not abrogate the laws of justice, except as love rises above justice to exceed its demands."[11] Therefore, the "ordinary affairs of the community" – i.e. the civic community – must be governed by justice in the explication and enforcement of rights and duties. To give a concrete example, in response to the 'Christian businessman' who contends that philanthropy toward the less fortunate is the most appropriate form of Christian giving because 'we Christians know that only uncoerced goodness is real goodness,' Niebuhr replies that because the upper classes will never willingly relinquish their power for the sake of the lower classes "we have to have a taxation system that demands more of us than we are inclined to give voluntarily; and we must maintain a social security system that holds us responsible for the security of other families

[10] *Ib.,* Book 19.17, pg. 877.
[11] Niebuhr, Reinhold, 'The Spirit of Justice' in *Love and Justice: Selections from the Shorter Writings of Reinhold Niebuhr* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1957), pg. 25.

than our own beyond our natural inclination."[12] Though the use of coercion cannot be justified by the pure gospel ethic of love, the law of justice, oriented primarily toward the less privileged, is based upon the reality that a society "can never trust all of its citizens to accept necessary social arrangements voluntarily."[13]

The mainline perspective, heavily influenced by Niebuhr over the past half century, has been instrumental in the establishment of, and moral vision beneath, many federal programs oriented toward the poor and vulnerable, including Medicare and Medicaid, in large part because the primary sphere within which mainline Christians have sought to enact justice is the broader political community.

Sectarian: I include the sectarian position as one of the predominant ecclesial perspectives not because there are many clearly identifiable 'sectarian' churches in Tennessee but because the perspective itself is held by a good number of pastors and laity within most ecclesial communions. Moreover, although the label of 'sectarian' typically bears a negative connotation, its use here, for lack of a better word, is simply intended to be descriptive. Essentially, the sectarian contends that the primary, if not only, sphere out of which Christians ought to maintain relational faithfulness with others is the Christian community itself.

Historically, this perspective is often traced back to a particular understanding of the early church. Prior to the establishment of the Holy Roman Church in the 4th century, many sectarians argue, the earliest Christian communities saw themselves as an alternative society with a distinctively contra-imperial way of being in the world. The New Testament itself reveals this very self-understanding, they say. An inscription on a monument from Western Asia Minor, dated 9 B.C.E., announces: "The most divine Caesar…we should consider equal to the

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[12] *Ib.,* pg. 26.
[13] 'The Ethic of Jesus and the Social Problem,' *Love and Justice*, pg. 35.

Beginning of all things…who being sent to us and our descendents as Savior…and having become [god] manifest…has been for the whole world the beginning of good news…therefore let a new era begin from his birth."[14] The gospels – in announcing "the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ" (Mk. 1:1); in proclaiming that "the time is fulfilled…believe in the good news" (Mk. 1:15); and in avowing that "in the beginning was the Word…And the Word became flesh and lived among us" (Jn. 1:1, 14) – seem to imply that becoming a Christian under the rule of Caesar's empire is to become a citizen of a different political order – the Church. As Paul says in Philippians, "Our *government* is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a *Savior*, the Lord Jesus, the Messiah" (Phil. 3:20). Seen from this perspective, the early church was the persecuted church, the church of the martyrs, precisely because, as an alternative socio-political community, it was deemed a subversive threat to the Roman Empire.

No theological figure in recent years has done more to reinvigorate the sectarian ecclesial perspective than Stanley Hauerwas. In a chapter subtitled, 'Why Justice is a Bad Idea for Christians,' Hauerwas challenges the unquestioned assumption held by many Christians that doing justice "demands that we must reshape and restructure society" – i.e. civic society – in order to permanently eliminate structural injustices.[15] The problem, he says, is that general appeals to 'justice' are inevitably based upon enlightenment ideals of individual rights and personal freedoms which need to be forcefully preserved by a liberal democratic state. These very assumptions, however, "are incompatible with how Christians are taught to regard and care for one another"[16] and lead to societies made up of individuals who are free from the needs of others. "We must be vigilant that the justice for which we call and hopefully practice is not that

[14] Quoted from Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and Empire: The Kingdom of God and the New World Disorder* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), pgs. 23-24.
[15] Hauerwas, Stanley, *After Christendom* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), pg. 45.
[16] *Ib.,* pg. 48.

derived from practices that deny God's justice."[17] Instead, the church's main task is to be a countercultural community embodying a radically different politics, which, in the long run, is the surest way for the church to serve the larger society.

The sectarians will offer that hospitals were originally the creation of monastic orders, as monks and nuns gathered the sick from public squares and nursed them back to health with Christian 'hospitality.' They will point to Christian groups like the Parabolani ('the reckless ones') who, during outbreaks of plague in the mid-third century, cared for the abandoned sick "without a thought as to the danger, assiduously ministering to them, tending them in Christ, and so most gladly departing this life along with them" (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 7.22.7).[18] And they will remind us that most church hospitals, although today operated chiefly upon market principles, were originally created to serve the needs of the underprivileged. What the sick who are poor and vulnerable truly need, the sectarians say, is not the kind of civic 'justice' that will allow them access to cost-driven and often corrupt medical complexes, but the truly compassionate and curative justice that only authentic ecclesial communions can provide.

Liberal: The fact that the designations 'liberal' and 'conservative' are originally political terms is a telling indicator of how focal the civic community is to both of these ecclesial perspectives, though in very different ways. Essentially, liberal Christians share with mainline churches the affirmation that health care ought to be universally available and federally funded, without a kind of Niebuhrian realism to qualify their calls for 'justice'; whereas conservative Christians share with sectarians the belief that local churches ought to care for the poor and vulnerable, while nevertheless energetically pursuing societal transformation through the political process. Within the current political *and* ecclesial landscape, these two terms, along

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[17] *Ib.,* pg. 10.
[18] Quoted from Martin E. Marty and Kenneth L. Vaux, eds., *Health/Medicine and the Faith Traditions: An Inquiry into Religion and Medicine* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), pg. 110.

with their attendant viewpoints, are far more likely to be used by Christians to self-identify, as Christians, than either 'mainline' or 'sectarian.'

The early 20th century Social Gospel movement in the United States, which grew out of 19th century theological developments in Europe, marks the defining beginnings of ecclesial liberalism. Walter Rauschenbusch, the leading figure in that movement, articulated a vision of the Christian faith which placed social redemption at the heart of Jesus' teachings and ministry. Critiquing individualistic interpretations of sin and salvation, Rauschenbusch argued that the central focus of the both the Old and New Testaments – the Kingdom of God – is a fundamentally social concept. Sin "is essentially selfishness…the sinful mind…is the unsocial and anti-social mind,"[19] and rebellion against God is especially manifest in the way egoism profits at the expense of the underprivileged. Moreover, a doctrine of God which follows the teachings of Jesus will, in the context of modern, industrialized societies, reflect the values of a liberal, democratic socialism. "A theological God who has no interest in the conquest of justice and fraternity is not a Christian." Consequently, our understandings of God "must join the social movement" because "the development of a Christian social order would be the highest proof of God's saving power."[20] For Rauschenbusch, the guiding aim of every truly converted Christian ought to be the entire transformation of the civic community under the law of Christ, for the good especially of the poor and less privileged.

More recently, Jim Wallis of the Sojourners community in Washington, D.C. has offered the most public articulation of the liberal ecclesial perspective.[21] In his book, *God's Politics*,

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[19] Rauschenbusch, Walter, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (New York, 1917), pg. 50, quoted from James C. Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought, Vol. I* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1997), pg. 292.
[20] *Social Gospel.,* pg. 178 in *Modern Christian Thought*, pg. 293.
[21] Although Wallis frames his position as a kind of 'third way' between the political left and right, he clearly fits the mold of an ecclesial liberal in that his 'progressive and prophetic vision of faith and politics' seeks 1) to speak to the country as a whole 2) on issues of politics 3) from a Christian perspective 4) that is focused upon issues of poverty, the environment, peace-making, human rights, etc.

Wallis critiques the privatization of faith, saying that the crucial matter in 'bringing God into politics' – i.e. into the civic community – is not whether but how Christians will do so. He thus offers what he describes as a "historic, biblical, and *genuinely* evangelical" politics that works to "take back our faith in the public square, especially in a time when a more authentic social witness is desperately needed."[22] In particular, this includes a principle emphasis upon overcoming poverty in America by ensuring "that all people who are able to work have jobs…access to good health care and decent housing, and are able to support their families."[23] Although Wallis balances his call to reform the civic community by emphasizing personal responsibility and the importance of non-governmental and faith-based organizations, nevertheless, in order to address such massive social issues as providing quality health care to over forty-five million currently uninsured Americans, "government, on all levels, must be involved."[24]

Like the sectarian position, the liberal ecclesial perspective is shared by pastors and laity across specific denominational markers. Although one can point to certain 'liberal' denominations, such as the United Church of Christ, the fact that a book like *God's Politics* speaks for a range of Christians, from Catholic to Presbyterian to Evangelical, means that the liberal ecclesial perspective is chiefly held together by its common assumption – that substantial and lasting justice for the poor and vulnerable can only be achieved through a structural transformation of the civic community.

Conservative: No ecclesial perspective has received more attention in recent years than that of the 'Christian Right,' primarily because of its profound influence upon local, state, and

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[22] Wallis, Jim, *God's Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It* (New York: Harper Collins, 2005), pg. 3.
[23] *Ib.,* pg. 241.
[24] *Ib.,* pg. 229.

national politics in the last quarter century. Conservative Christians, much like their liberal counterparts, have actively engaged in political activism at the level of the civic community in order to advance what they perceive to be core Christian values, but, much like the sectarians, they believe that the poor and vulnerable ought to be cared for not by civic but rather ecclesial communities.

Although, like each of the perspectives, the conservative movement is held together by a significant number of constituencies and concerns, some of the prominent centers of conservative thought include the Southern Baptist Convention, Nondenominational congregations and para-church organizations (i.e. Promise Keepers, Intervarsity, FCA), the Christian Coalition, the Institute on Religion and Democracy, and James Dobson's Focus on the Family. The Institute on Religion and Democracy (IRD) has been instrumental in seeking to provide explicitly Christian foundations for the support of democracy, holding up the theological dignity of human individuals as grounds for pressing toward the political freedom inherent in democratic rule and the economic freedom opened up by free market capitalism. Also central to the IRD, and the conservative movement in general, is a strong emphasis upon limiting the powers and reach of the state. "The state is not one whole of society, but is one important actor in the society. Other institutions – notably the family, the Church, educational, economic, and cultural enterprises – are at least equally important actors in the society…which must be respected by the state."[25] Catholic conservatives, in particular, look to the Catholic doctrine of 'subsidiarity,' which holds that "it is an injustice…and a disturbance of right order to transfer to the larger and higher collectivity functions which can be performed and provided for by lesser

[25] *Christianity and Democracy* (Washington, D.C.: Institute on Religion and Democracy, 1981), pg. 10. Quoted in J. Philip Wogaman, *Christian Perspectives On Politics* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), pg. 107.

and subordinate bodies."[26] The conservative movement, therefore, has worked energetically to protect 'subordinate bodies' – i.e. ecclesial communities – through the political implementation of tax cuts, the weakening of governmental regulatory programs, and the dismantling of government welfare and entitlement programs. As Ralf Reed urged in his book *Active Faith* in 1996, when he was then leader of the Christian Coalition, "one-third of the functions and spending of the existing federal government" should be returned to state and nongovernmental organizations, with welfare functions in particular being transferred "to churches, synagogues, and local communities."[27]

The Religious Right has been instrumental not only in helping elect conservative politicians at every level of government in recent years, but also in shifting both parties toward the political right. In this sense, conservative Christians deserve credit both for helping realize the massive tax cuts proposed by a Republican President and passed by a Republican controlled Congress, but also for creating the kind of political climate in which Bill Clinton, a Democratic president, would 'end welfare as we know it,' and Phil Bredesen, a Democratic governor, would succeed in cutting over 200,000 Tennesseans from a government-run health care program. Whether 'churches, synagogues, and local communities' will significantly increase 'welfare functions' in the coming years – as the conservative ecclesial perspective has envisioned – remains to be seen.

Conclusion

Joon Powell has set up a website entitled, *Faces of TennCare*, which includes portraits and brief narratives of some of the 200,000 Tennesseans who have lost health insurance due to the cuts to TennCare. The following is a representative sampling of those voices:

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[26] *Quadragesimo Anno*, para. 79 in *Christian Perspectives*, pg. 108.
[27] Reed, Ralph, *Active Faith: How Christians Are Changing the Soul of American Politics* (New York: Free Press, 1996), pg. 192 in *Christian Perspectives*, pg. 128.

Joyce Waters is surviving bipolar disorder, heart disease, migraines and several other serious medical conditions without health insurance. Her doctor has supplied her with free samples of her medications, but she does not know how long this will last. She asks, "If I get real sick, what am I going to do? Die?"

Since George Watson lost his TennCare, he had a stroke which left him with a more than $1000 medical bill and the left side of his body cold. Since he was unable to work or collect disability, Watson is homeless. He is also diabetic with high blood pressure. "I'm so fed up with this system," Watson says. "Sometimes a fellow is better off dead. I worked all my life and have nothing to show for it."

Beverly Wilson and her daughter Brandi Wilson are both living without health insurance since losing their TennCare coverage. Beverly Wilson has been declared uninsurable by private insurance companies and has been going without her monthly blood checks for her diabetes and heart disease, because she has been unable to find a clinic where she can afford it. Since she pays out of her pocket for her medications, their family has been living on fewer groceries. Wilson has been working extra hours at one fulltime job and one part time job as a caregiver. Brandi's work at preschool also helps to pay for her medication and groceries. "I pray everyday that I'll get some kind of help," Beverly says.[28]

As this paper has tried to demonstrate, the biblical mandate to do justice – to faithfully maintain covenant relationship with those who are isolated and cut off by steadfastly working to restore them to wholeness through active inclusion and curative participation in the life of community – is an essential, non-negotiable foundation of Christian faith and life. Whether or not 'some kind of help' will be extended to Beverly, Brandi, George, Joyce, and all those who are currently cut off from secure access to health care and thereby threatened with death is not a question that any church or individual Christian is justified – *judged righteous* – to ask. *Either* Christian churches will actively seek justice for Tennessee's sick and dying *or* they will already have ceased to be the Church of Jesus Christ. The only possible question is precisely *how* the catastrophically ill, the uninsurable, the terminally and mentally ill, and the poor and elderly will obtain justice, or rather, into *which* community they are to be welcomed, the civic or the ecclesial. This is not to say that there are ultimately no substantial differences between the

[28]Powell, Joon, http://www.joonpowell.info/tenncare.html.

various ecclesial perspectives or that these very real differences are irrelevant or unimportant, but it is an attempt to shift the focus away from what seem to be legitimate theological differences concerning the proper locus of relational faithfulness. In so doing, however, in pausing long enough to refocus, what becomes clear is that Tennessee's mainline and liberal churches were basically mute as Beverly and her daughter were cut off from the relational supports they had received from the civic community. One can now see that the sectarian and conservative churches are doing practically nothing to welcome the suffering bodies of ones like Joyce and George into their own ecclesial bodies. And the voice of the Righteous One, speaking from the last day, which is the Day of Justice, becomes ever more perceptible: *"I was sick, and you did not care for me."*