

THE IMPORTANCE OF A THEOLOGY OF

SOCIAL CHANGE

A BEGINNER'S GUIDE BY STEVEN ANDERSON

INDEX:

1. Foreword
2. What is a Theology of Social Change?
3. Why Pursue Social Transformation?
4. What Would Jesus Do?
5. Queering Community
6. The Difference Between A Theology of Social Change and Colonialism
7. Your Community
8. End Notes and Citations

FOREWORD

This pamphlet is a beginners guide to a body of academic theological research on social transformation, a field of study with great potential for personal, spiritual and community growth. I have put this quick guide together in order to make this knowledge more accesable to the masses. Hopefully it will peak some interest and inspire you to learn more. By studying scripture, Jesus' life in particular, the reader becomes increasingly aware of just how radical Jesus was. He defied the social conventions of his day, both religiously and culturally in order to bring about the kingdom of heaven on earth. It is my hope that this guide will inspire readers to look inward, reflecting on their relationships with Jesus. I also hope that readers will reach out into their communities emulating Jesus as he decategorized religious traditions, patriarchal oppressions, and cultural taboos in order to bring all peoples who he came into contact with

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together into one ecumenical family. This guide is not comprehensive. Theologies of social change vary from community to community. Use this guide to critically rewrite your understanding of community and to build healthy relationships with the diverse people within it.

WHAT IS A THEOLOGY OF SOCIAL CHANGE?

While it may sound complex, building a theology of social change is perhaps one of the most positive undertakings a person can do towards building a healthy community. A theology of social change is a methodology that invokes our strongly held beliefs and turns them into social actions.¹ Theologies of social change reflect on the needs we see in our immediate communities, be it in our neighborhood, city, or church, or social circles, and incorporates our core principles and beliefs towards problem-solving to provide for those needs. In so doing we look forward past tradition and orthodoxy in order to relevantly attend to our needs.²

Most often a person's strongly held convictions are informed by their religious faith, social circles or sense of camaraderie with their environment.³ Social change is often best looked at as a process of social transformation. Social transformation can take many shapes yet is usually a process of identifying social needs, inequalities, oppression, or abuse and using a process of education, advocacy, and practical actions to bring about justice while also relieving the needs of the community.

WHY PURSUE SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION?

It may be likely that you have noticed a social imbalance or need in your community. Perhaps it's an oppression that faces someone you love, or you directly. Issues like workplace racism, the gentrification of a neighborhood that forces low-income families to relocate, sexism in the workplace or the refusal to acknowledge or reconcile the gender identity and sexuality of a person of faith, touch people's lives every day. In order to effect positive change in these areas and others, we need to do more than protest or enact protective legislation. Like Martin Luther King Jr we can take an approach of integration and change from within.⁴ Without this work oppressive systems will not be brought to justice and the status quo will be the same.

Developing a theology of social transformation has the power to change opinion, bringing light to issues that are overlooked and challenge social norms. By exposing issues of social justice and patterning our responses to them with a Christological or queer framework we can make progressive changes in our communities and influence others to take action in their communities as well.⁵



WHAT WOULD JESUS DO?

In the Christian Tradition, we are called to follow the image and person of Christ in our daily lives. In looking at Biblical passages surrounding Christ's life and actions we are forced to reckon with a radical image of Jesus. Throughout his life, Jesus continued to push social boundaries to their extremes in order to meet people's needs and to bring about new understanding of issues including poverty, disease, death, and sexuality.

Kelly Brown Douglass notes a powerful example of Jesus' radical boundary reimagining through Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan Woman in John 4, 1-42.^{6,7} At the time Jews considered Samaritans as unclean, and due to the heteropatriarchal social system of the time, it was unheard of for a Jewish man and a Samaritan woman to interact with one another. It was also not socially acceptable for a woman to have had multiple husbands or sexual partners (as is noted of the woman in the scriptures), yet as we see in John 4 Jesus went out of his way to travel to a socially unacceptable location (for a Jew of that era) to engage in a long conversation with a social outcast.

This action certainly made a statement with the woman at the well, as well as with the disciples who were less than pleased at Jesus' apparent faux pa. In the end, Jesus had defied several social norms in order to offer salvation to her as well as to the people of that Samaritan village, an action that was seen as heresy by Jewish religious leaders at the time. In this story, Jesus out-right ignores the social boundaries of his day

in order to include more people into the community of God. This is only one among countless examples of Jesus's rejection of social norms during his lifetime. In other passages, Christ heals lepers who were seen as social outcasts cursed by God with disease, rebukes religious leaders for their exclusionary interpretations of religious law and even destroys the boundary of death by raising Lazarus in John 11.^{8,9,10,11,12,13}

While we may not be able to redefine the boundaries of death without the powers of the divine, we are able to follow Jesus's other examples of defiance towards social etiquette. If we look at Jesus as an example of a person who rejects oppressive societal norms and demonstrates an attitude of inclusion towards the oppressed we have a prime model for enacting positive social change in our communities.



QUEERING COMMUNITY

In order to fully grapple with the issues facing our communities, we should not only look at a Christological approach to inclusionary boundary-crossing but also to the methodology of queer theory. Queer theory is not only an attempt to deconstruct and reconstruct social expectations of a person's sexuality or gender identity, it is also a framework for the constant deconstruction and reconstruction of all socially imposed expectations in order to highlight overlooked points of view.¹⁴ While the landscape of queer theory is ever-changing and tends to focus on the societal construct of sexuality, it can be a useful tool in building theologies of social change. By critically examining arguments made by community members that highlight the systemic inequities between social groups and reframing our viewpoints to include the less dominant voices in the room we can broaden our perspectives on what types of people make up our communities and identify issues that the community should address in order to bring about healthy social change.¹⁵

Once these inequities are identified we can get to the process of crossing and blurring the societal borderlands as acts of resistance such as destabilizing heteropatriarchal power dynamics that unjustly penalize women for their gender, or renouncing systematic white supremacy that prevents educational and vocational opportunities for millions of people around the world. A poignant example of destabilizing social conventions in order to build an inclusive framework for community comes from queering the image of Christ, the White Jew and finding the image of the Black

Christ.¹⁶ Kwok Pui-Lan argues that in response to Christianity's tradition of white supremacy the image of the Black Christ was created by theologians in the 1960s. Kwok specifically points to the symbolically Black Christ as mentioned by Kelly Brown Douglass as a medium for deconstructing and reconstructing social boundaries and theological expectations.¹⁷ He argues that by reimagining Jesus as being of African descent, by queering Jesus, it enables poor black communities to relate more closely with Jesus. By reconstructing Jesus as Black he continues to serve the needs of the poor and oppressed of their communities as well as those of the near east during Hellenistic times.¹⁸

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A THEOLOGY OF SOCIAL CHANGE AND COLONIALISM

Some might argue that developing a Theology of Social Change is too radical or ambitious for their social group. People may feel that boundary crossing and deconstruction could undermine the foundations of their community group by imposing new similarly exclusionary boundaries. However, unlike colonialism which seeks to impose regionally "new" power structures, beliefs, and practices through force, a healthy theology of social change relies on the concept that all people from the community are represented and included.¹⁹ Everyone is welcome in voicing their needs as well as taking part in the community actions necessary to bring about positive community growth.

The intermingling of various perspectives on an issue, such as including

trans-positive lesbian feminist voices in the conversation for access to medical care for people with increased risk of HIV, can allow for a more well-informed vision of social change when advocating for open access to low-cost, destigmatized healthcare. Previous conversations on LGBTQ+ access to healthcare were often dominated by the more singular perspectives of gay, cisgender men. While the actions of that group may have moved the social boundary line of healthcare access from its original place it did so to the detriment of reinforcing patriarchal power dynamics and the system continues to exclude access (or make access difficult) without concern for those who may have the most risk in terms of preventative and treatment-based healthcare.²⁰

YOUR COMMUNITY

Now that we have a brief understanding of the importance of developing a theology of social change, and have a grasp on what is involved, we can begin to look at the challenges our communities face and become advocates for change based on queer theory and the life of Jesus Christ. These are good places to start your reflection on what you would like to see transformed in your community. Identifying issues is the first step. The second step is challenging the status quo. Take personal action at crossing boundaries like Christ did and encourage others to follow.

If your faith community struggles to respond critically to the needs of your congregation you might respond by challenging your church leadership's authority, and addressing the differences

between traditionalism and orthodoxy.²¹ Address the Pastor, elders or council about your concerns. Prepare alternate sermons debating the best interests of the community as well as Christological positions speaking out against incongruent political views and conduct. These actions challenge the authority of tradition and seek to bring equal representation (and validation) to various biblical interpretations.

If your community faces racial discrimination or discrimination based on sex, sexuality or gender identity you might respond by resisting attacks with peaceful protests, by inviting the larger community to reconsider their positions, by educating oppressors about your humanity while also respecting the humanity of your oppressors.^{22,23} These actions remove boundaries and help defy the social constructs of race, gender, and Identity. By removing the superficial boundaries and categorizations between peoples we build a larger community for humanity to thrive.²⁴

If your community faces an untreated health crisis, you might respond by addressing the social limitations that prevent low-income families from accessing healthcare, position scientific data against vaccination misconceptions, and challenge religious and educational systems to implement curricula of best practices for preventing the spread of treatable diseases.²⁵

While the examples provided are not exhaustive by any means, they can be a stepping stone into larger conversations about generating positive social change and building strong, healthy communities.

END NOTES AND CITATIONS

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