

# Presbyterians and Social Justice

*A Resource for Presbyterian Heritage Sunday  
May 20, 2001*

Prepared by the staff of the Presbyterian Historical Society,  
425 Lombard Street, Philadelphia, Pa. 19147  
(215) 627-1852; FAX: (215) 627-0509

P.O. Box 849, Montreat, N.C. 28757  
(828) 669-7061; FAX: (828) 669-5369  
URL for our web site: [WWW.HISTORY.PCUSA.ORG](http://WWW.HISTORY.PCUSA.ORG)

## Points to Ponder

The “promotion of social righteousness” is one of the five Great Ends of our church, and stems from our reverence for God’s covenant with Creation plus an ample regard for the pervasive power of sin and the conviction that God is at work in history, through Christ, for the rescue of the world. We believe God works for right relations among all peoples and calls godly people to work for justice—with a special regard for the poor and weak.

**1. Defining justice.** A secular definition of justice might say that it is essentially about impartiality, equality, and fairness—a personal respect for human rights, and a social commitment to securing those rights for all. As true as this is, the parable of the laborers (Matt. 20: 1–16) illustrates that God’s justice can seem, from a worldly point of view, flatly unfair. When the Church attempts to apply its own guidelines for humane justice to public affairs, it is sometimes accused of being one-sided, soft-hearted, unqualified, and unjust. How do we interpret the Bible’s preferential option for the poor in an egalitarian, democratic culture which values strict impartiality so highly?

**2. Pursuing justice.** American Presbyterians have promoted social justice in many ways. We have always taught the values of justice which inform public discussions of social policy and law and shape private behavior. We have frequently been active, through committees and coalitions, to mobilize public opinion and to promote causes or to reform abuses. We have often participated in court cases, petition drives, and lobbying efforts for the adoption of laws and legal remedies. And we have occasionally, as in the case of Abolition and Prohibition, created new political parties to pursue political power for Christian ends. How do we, as citizens and as a church, promote the good of society while maintaining the integrity of our faith?

**3. Preaching justice.** The ecumenical lectionary for May 20, when read with a sensitivity to social context, illustrates God’s care for right relations both now, and in the life to come. Jesus at Bethesda (John 5:1–9) heals a poor and helpless outcast, and in restoring his health, restores him to his community. Paul at Philippi (Acts 16:9–15) goes to a meeting place expecting to preach to Jewish men, and instead befriends a Gentile woman, who becomes his first convert in Macedonia. John’s vision of the life to come (Rev. 21–22) is of a New Jerusalem in which all relations have been put right. There is health, security, and abundance for all.

## Celebration Ideas

**1. Use the thematic bulletin cover** on the other side of this sheet as your bulletin of the morning, or copy the text onto a half sheet to use as a bulletin insert. This material is not copyrighted so that you may photocopy it freely. Additional printed copies are available from the Presbyterian Historical Society’s Philadelphia office (address and phone number at left), or you can download a formatted printable version (PDF) from our web site.

**2. Use the new hymn** by Carolyn Winfrey Gillette published here for the first time. The Reverend Gillette is co-pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in Pitman, New Jersey and author of *Gifts of Love: New Hymns for Today’s Worship* (Geneva Press, 2000).

**3. Review the *Book of Order* and the *Book of Confessions*** for their many passages which describe the nature of the Church’s ministry to others. Chapter Three, “The Church and Its Mission,” (G-3.0000ff.) and Part Two of the Confession of 1967, “The Ministry of Reconciliation,” (9.31ff) are especially eloquent.

**4. Review some of the recent social statements** of the church. There is an extensive library of social policy statements on the PC(U.S.A.) web site at [WWW.PCUSA.ORG](http://WWW.PCUSA.ORG). Click on the “Social Policy Compilation” link on the menu offered by the “Document Archive” link listed under “Internet Resources” on the “Resources” page off the Home Page. For those who do not have Internet access, there is a book, *Presbyterian Social Witness Policy Compilation (1946–1998)* produced by the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy, PC(USA), available through the Presbyterian Distribution Service. To order, call (800) 524-2612.

**5. Portray a Presbyterian “hero of reform”**—such as those on our bulletin cover, or another with whom you are more familiar—in a skit or Minute for Mission. Your youth group may enjoy researching several heroes as a group project, and presenting the results in drama, video, documentary, or display. Some basic bibliographical information is available at our web site.

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“God, May Your Justice Roll Down”

LOBE DEN HERREN 14.14.4.7.8  
 (“Praise Ye the Lord, the Almighty,” PH #482)

God, may your justice roll down like the waters you send here,  
And may your righteousness flow like a stream without end here!  
Praying this prayer, many have struggled and dared,  
All for the world you intend here.

Christ, we give thanks for past saints who renewed education,  
Freed the oppressed, brought your healing, and fought segregation.  
Savior and Lord, great were the risks they endured,  
Bearing your hope and salvation.

We as your church now remember these stories of others  
And pray your Spirit will send us, as your sons and daughters.  
Show us the way we too can serve you each day,  
Till justice rolls down like waters.

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