

Neighborhood and Brotherhood

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By Robert Alexander Webb.

INTRODUCTION

Robert A. Webb (1856–1919) spent his first fifteen years in Oxford, Mississippi before moving with his family to Nashville, Tennessee. He was educated at the then famous Webb School south of Nashville in Culleoka. He earned his BA at Southwestern Presbyterian University in Clarksville, Tennessee (now Rhodes College, Memphis) and studied for the ministry under John L. Girardeau, DD at old Columbia Theological Seminary in Columbia, South Carolina. After serving the Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS) as a very able pastor, he was called in 1892 to succeed Joseph Ruggles Wilson (Woodrow Wilson's father) in the chair of theology at his college alma mater. In 1908 the PCUS General Assembly elected him unanimously to move to Louisville Presbyterian Seminary (KY) where he labored as a popular professor, succeeding the erudite Francis Beattie in the Chair of Apologetics and Systematic Theology. There he remained until his death in 1919. To his credit are numerous publications including journal articles and several books such as *The Reformed Doctrine of Adoption* (which was published posthumously without being completed), *The Theology of Infant Salvation, Christian Salvation, Its Doctrine and Experience*, *The Christian Hope*, and was a contributor to *Elements of Truth* in 2 volumes, from which the current literary piece is excerpted. This work was a collection of addresses delivered at Belhaven College, Jackson, Mississippi in 1915. In addition to Webb's incisive lectures, John M. Wells delivered the seminal addresses which would eventually become *Southern Presbyterian Worthies*. Webb was one of the speakers for the event and delivered discourses at this small college of the PCUS. He considered a number of popular approaches to meeting the needs of the whole man. Socialism, utopianism, secularism, humanitarianism and even the "social gospel" of Walter Rauschenbusch were within his

crosshairs. The readers will recall that Rauschenbusch was an eminent sociological theologian of the early 20th century. He published such influential books as *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (1917). Prior to Webb's lectures and subsequent publication, Rauschenbusch had published two other books from his socio-psychological perspective of man. Webb's work was a very able biblical critique of the popular non-Christian approaches to man's plight, concluding with several lectures on a biblical-theological approach that maintained the spirituality of the church, while at the same time encouraging and equipping the philanthropic and humanitarian nature and task of Christians in the public square. The extract presented here comes from a chapter in volume two of *Elements of Truth*, pages 78–90. Very minor form edits have been exercised to help with ease of reading. Original substance is left as is from the original.

C. N. WILLBORN

NEIGHBORHOOD AND BROTHERHOOD

It is common today to hear Jesus represented as the first socialist of the world, and his religion described as a practical, or as some say, an impractical, social programme. It is current to hear the Christian Church pilloried as an institution which has grossly perverted and travestied the ethics of Christ.

Professor Vedder gives us a long list of causes for "the social failure of the Church." He blames Paul first and foremost. "Paul," he says, "saved Christianity from perishing in the cradle. But it was almost an equal disaster that Paul did win." It was his misfortune that he did not know Jesus in the flesh; "he was born and reared in a family of the well-to-do class, and never felt the bitterness of poverty." Hence he "deflected Christianity from its original line of progress." Next to the desocializing of Christianity by Paul, came the early attempts to formulate doctrines and dogmas. Then there was

the influence of paganism, which injected into Christianity its ideas and ideals, carrying the cause of Christ far afield. Then came those bitter persecutions which caused the disciples to think more of the world to come than of this world, which carried the Church still farther away from the initial idea of a social regeneration. Then came the dark ages which marked “the complete passing of the ideal of Jesus.” Protestantism failed to resuscitate the socialism of Christianity because it had “to conquer freedom of thought, and so devoted itself to creed-making.”¹

So this professor in a Protestant Theological Seminary (Crozier) blames Paul and Providence that the Church has been unsocial from the days of Christ to the present time! This is a severe indictment. Many, however, within the Christian circle are prosecuting it both with argument and rhetoric.

I think, perhaps, the radical fallacy is a failure to observe the biblical distinction between “neighborhood” and “brotherhood.” The word “neighbor” occurs in the Christian Scriptures more than one hundred and thirty-five times, and the word “brother” appears more than five hundred times. These words appear in both Testaments in many connections, and almost in every book of the Bible. Besides the words themselves, there are many cognate phrases and kindred expressions. I think we can infer from this usage that the Bible does teach some doctrine of “neighborhood” and some doctrine of “brotherhood.”

“Neighbor” is an Anglo-Saxon word, and primarily signifies one who resides near to another. The basal idea is that of proximity in space. “Brother,” on the other hand, primarily signifies one who had the same parentage with another. The basal idea is that of a common generation, a common origin, a common blood. Etymologically, a “neighborhood” is a geographical community, and a “brotherhood” is a consanguineous community. A group of human beings having a common place is a “neighborhood,” and a group having a common origin is a “brotherhood.” Proximity is the ruling idea with the one, and kinship with the other.

Words, however, have both acquired and expanded meanings as well as their original and proper meanings, but they never entirely lose the aroma of their original significance however far usage may take them from their starting points. The flavor of their derivations always clings to them whatever their history. And so these words “neighborhood” and “brotherhood” can never get away entirely from their original meanings.

The law of good neighborhood was set up in the Mosaic legislation. “If thou meet thine enemy’s ox or his

ass going astray, thou shalt surely bring it back to him again. If thou see the ass of him that hateth thee, lying under his burden, and wouldest forbear to help him; thou shalt surely help with him.” (Exod. 23:4–5). “Also thou shalt not oppress the stranger” (Exod. 23:9). “Thou shalt not see thy brother’s ass or his ox fall down by the way, and hide thyself from them; thou shalt surely help him to lift them up again.” (Deut. 22:4). From such instances it is easy to generalize how the Old Testament required consideration and assistance for the enemy, the stranger, and the brother Israelite. The disciple of the Old Economy could not be faithful to its precepts and spirit, and withhold a helping hand from the needy whoever he might be, Jewish brother, or Philistine enemy, or the unknown stranger by chance within the gates. There was a vast deal of legislation which hedged the neighbor with protection and made him a subject of consideration and kindness.

Yet Israel, in the days of our Lord, had come to narrow the claimants upon bounty and charity and help to those of his own blood and household. Our Lord complained vehemently against these traditions and false interpretations, with which Jewish ecclesiastics had overlaid the law of God as given by Moses and the prophets. He particularly and emphatically corrected the law of good neighborhood, along with other serious misinterpretations of the rules which Jehovah had laid down. He recalled the fact that it had been plainly written in Leviticus, “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself” (Lev. 19:1). Consequently he was adding nothing new to the original law, when He said in the Sermon on the Mount, (Matt. 5:43), or when He said to His disciples when they were asking Him who would be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 19:19), or when He said to the scribe asking which is the greatest commandment of the law (Matt. 22:39), or when He said to the young lawyer who tempted Him (Luke 10:27), “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.” On these four different occasions He made Himself plain, and asserted that the law of the Old Testament, as well as the law of the New Testament, made the love of self the measure of love for the neighbor. It was a high doctrine of neighborliness, but it had been the doctrine from the very beginning of divine instruction.

The apostle Paul, the great expositor of Christianity to the European and heathen world, also signalized the same principle, in perfect conformity with his divine Master, as one of the cardinal tenets of his gospel.

1. Henry Clay Vedder, *Socialism and the Ethics of Jesus* (New York: Macmillan, 1912), 437–79. Hb, xv, 527 pp.

He said to the Romans, “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself” (Rom. 13:9). He again said to the Galatians, “For all the law (of neighborliness) is fulfilled in one word, even this, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself” (Gal. 5:14). And the practical James said to the general Christian world, “If ye fulfill the royal law, according to the Scriptures, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself, ye do well.” (James 2:8). So Moses and the prophets, Christ and the apostles have written it all over the Scriptures as the “royal law” of God, “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.”

Our Lord also phrased it as a Golden Rule: “All things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets” (Matt. 7:12). Men must show the same kindness to others, which, under similar circumstances, they could reasonably desire should be shown to them. But Christian neighborliness must go beyond the ethical neighborliness of the Golden Rule, “for if ye (Christians) salute your brethren only, what do ye more than others? Do not even the publicans so?” (Matt. 5:47). Christian courtesy and generosity, Christian good-will and neighborliness, must have a wider range and a deeper glow than mark worldly salutations and cordialities.

At the time of our Lord the scribes and Pharisees and ecclesiastics had restricted the idea of “neighbor” to members of their own race and kindred. The alien and the enemy and all non-Jewish people they had put beyond the pale of neighborhood and denied to them all neighborly treatment. Our Lord corrected this narrow view of neighborhood. In the Sermon on the Mount he said, “Ye have heard that it hath been said—ye have heard the law of good neighborhood interpreted in this way—Thou shalt love thy neighbor and hate thine enemy: but I say unto you, Love your enemies—the law of Old Testament good neighborhood requires you to be charitable to your enemies” (Matt. 5:43–44). When, on another occasion, a young lawyer said to Him, “Who is my neighbor—define him,” Christ answered with His matchless parable of the Good Samaritan, and showed that every human being who may be in need is to be ranked and dealt with as a neighbor (Luke 10:30–37). The whole human world thus becomes one common neighborhood. The earth’s surface is not wide enough for any man to be far enough removed to be beyond the pale of neighborly treatment. Whoever lives in this world is to be regarded as a neighbor to everybody else in the earth.

But the Scriptures have a doctrine of “brotherhood” as well as a doctrine of “neighborhood.” They use the word “brother” and its cognates a great multitude of

times. These uses may be reduced to three classes: (1) brothers by nature, (2) brothers by law, and (3) brothers by grace.

Natural brothers were those related to each other by descent from a common parent or ancestor. They were blood-connections. The sons of Jacob were called “Joseph’s brethren” (Gen. 50:15). The descendants of Esau were called “the brethren” of the children of Israel (Deut. 2:4), because both Jacob and Esau were the sons of Isaac. The natural brother belonged to the immediate household, or had a blood-descent from a common parentage. For instance, the Scriptures never represent the Canaanite as the brother of Israel, or the Roman as the brother of the Jew. A community of blood is essential to the idea of natural brothers.

Legal brothers, on the other hand, are those who had artificially been connected with each other by marriage, or who had been adopted into such nearness as would have been constituted by nature had they been born into that relation. Scripture co-ordinates the relationships of consanguinity and affinity. Law-kin are the same as blood-kin. The degrees are equal, and without distinction. The Levitical marriage-law prescribed that no marriage could be contracted with an in-law-relation of the same degree as the forbidden blood-relation (Lev. 18:6–20). This explains how “Joseph, the husband of Mary of whom Jesus was born,” was by Matthew called the son of “Jacob” and by Luke the son of “Heli” (Matt. 1:16; Luke 3:23). Jacob was the natural father of Joseph, and Heli was his father-in-law, but the narratives call him the “son” of each, because in the Bible relations of consanguinity and affinity are treated without distinction. That which is constituted by law and convention is as real as that which is constituted by nature. In the Scriptures a brotherhood by law is the same as a brotherhood by blood and nature.

But there is another “brotherhood” in Scripture which is neither natural nor legal, but **gracious**. This kind of fraternity is constituted by a common relationship to the Lord Jesus. It is not the blood which courses through their veins, nor yet the legal bonds which hold them together, but the operation of the Spirit of God within them, giving them a common nature and a fraternal relation to the Lord Jesus. This group are brethren because they have experienced the “second birth.” In the Christian brotherhood, God is the **Father**, Christ is the **Elder Brother**, and all Christians are but the younger members in the **Family of God**, in the household of faith. This is not metaphor, a mere human analogy without any basis in reality. On the contrary it is a true and

literal fact, showing a family which has been constituted by a work of grace.

Such a brotherhood is constituted in two ways: (1) subjectively by regeneration, which conveys the nature of a child of God, and (2) objectively by adoption, which gives the rights and standing of a child in the house and family of God. It is one thing to have the **spirit** of a child, and another thing to have the **status** of a child. We can readily think of earthly families in which a member has all the rights and privileges of a son in the house, but who is entirely devoid of every trace of a filial spirit and temper; and, on the other hand, we can think of a family in which the child has none of the formal rights of a son of the house, while he carries in his bosom a genuine filial heart and disposition. He may inherit from a father as a matter of legal right, but be destitute of the most primary sense of filial love and respect. Or he may have the sweetest and most child-like disposition, and yet be the subject of a legal disinheritance. To become a member of the Christian household, a sinner needs both the heart of a child and the standing of a child. The one is provided for in the gospel by regeneration and sanctification, and the other is provided for by adoption. The one gives him a fraternal nature and the other gives him a fraternal status. And so does grace create a genuine "brotherhood."

Christ is often called "the only begotten" Son of God (John 1:14, 18; 3:16, 18; 1 John 4:9), and also "the first begotten" son of God (Rom. 8:29; Col. 1:15; Heb. 1:6; 12:23). Theologians call the one the **monogenetic** sonship, and the other the **primogenetic** sonship of Christ. As the only-begotten Son He had no brethren, but as the first-begotten Son He had many brethren. The one is His trinitarian and eternal sonship in the Godhead, and the other His mediatorial and redemptive sonship in the Church. The monogenetic Son had a divine nature only; the primogenetic Son had a divine-human nature. The monogenetic Son had no birth-day; the primogenetic Son was born in the fulness of time. The monogenetic Son had no brethren in the Trinity; the primogenetic Son has a multitude of brethren in the Church of God. He is not "the elder brother" in the parable, but He is the Elder Brother in the Christian brotherhood.

I think then we may conclude that the Scriptures do give us the idea of a Christian "neighborhood" on the one hand, and a Christian "brotherhood" on the other. The membership of the "neighborhood" includes all men indiscriminately, while the membership of the "brotherhood" is limited to those who are "in Christ Jesus." Our attitude towards the "brotherhood" is closer and more intense than our bearing towards

the "neighbor." This is expressed by Peter when he says, "Honour all men. Love the brotherhood." (1 Peter 2:17). Honor the "neighborhood," but love the "brotherhood." One draws deeper upon the heart, its sympathies and affections, than does the other.

"The New Theology," we are told by one of its formal expositors and earnest defenders, "is but the religious articulation of the social movement." He calls it "spiritual socialism." He tells us that "the great social movement which is now taking place in every country of the civilized world towards universal peace and brotherhood, and a better and fairer distribution of wealth, is really the same movement as that which in the more distinctly religious sphere is coming to be called the New Theology."²

These twin "movements," the one religious and theological, the other social and economic, aim at the destruction of the biblical distinction between neighborhood and brotherhood. The universal neighborhood must be converted into a universal brotherhood. "The universal Fatherhood of God," "the universal brotherhood of man," and "the solidarity of the human race," are the fundamental and formative ideas of the entire propaganda. We are being told, as if it were a commonplace truism, that, while other prophets made God known as Creator and Preserver, Ruler and **Redeemer**, "it was reserved for Christ to make these all to become figurative expressions, and **the Father** to become His real and true name."³ We are being assured, as a matter of course, beyond all question, that this was the original and unique and distinctive revelation of the Lord Jesus.

Jesus did habitually speak of God as "my Father." In His teachings He continually spoke of Him to the disciples as "your Father." He taught His disciples to pray "our Father which art in heaven." There is not a single instance on record in all the New Testament where the antecedent pronouns, "my," "our," "thy," "your," "his," "their," prefixed to "Father," refer to other than Christ and Christians. There is not one reported saying of Jesus which directly or by implication represents Him as teaching that God is the Father of all men indiscriminately and without distinction. To Christ and to those who are "in Christ" He is indeed a loving Father, in all the infinite fulness and tenderness of that blessed name. To all other men than those who have been related to Him by grace, He is creator and preserver, benefactor

2. R. J. Campbell, *The New Theology* (New York: Macmillan, 1912), 14. Hb, ix, 258 pp.

3. Wilbur F. Tillett, *Personal Salvation: Studies in Christian Doctrine pertaining to the Spiritual Life* (Nashville, TN: Cokesbury Press, 1912), 10. Hb, xx, 538 pp.

and ruler and judge—the hater of iniquity and the punisher of evil-doers.

That God was the Father of all Israel is an idea abundantly set forth by the prophets and made familiar to every Jew, but Israel was a type, not of all mankind, but of the people of God—that portion of mankind which was in covenant-relation to their Maker. It is not even claimed that the Old Testament made any such revelation as that God was the Father of all the race. The very contention is that the common and universal Fatherhood of God was first made known by the Lord Jesus, and constitutes something peculiar and exclusive in the revelation of Christ. Israel was God's "son," God's typical son, and all Israelites were consequently "brethren," not because they were descendants from Abraham according to the flesh, but because they were bound together by a covenant of grace, which typed the brotherhood of all believers and Christians—all the spiritual posterity of Abraham as the "father of the faithful." On one occasion the Jews had a controversy with our Lord, in which they argued that God was their Father because they were the seed of Abraham. Jesus retorted, "If God were your Father, ye would love Me.... Ye are of your father the devil." (Jno. 8:37-44).

We see in the teaching of Jesus a message which made **neighborhood**, not national and racial, but universal and world-wide. But there is nothing in His teachings which thus expands **brotherhood**, and makes it co-extensive with the limits of the human race. The idea of an all-comprehensive neighborhood is in the Great Supper, the Marriage of the King's Son, the Wicked Husbandman, the Samaritan Woman, the Samaritan Leper, the Servant of the Centurion, the Canaanitish Woman, and specifically in the Good Samaritan (John 4; Luke 17:18; Matt. 7:26; Mark 7:26).

It is undeniably true that the Bible teaches that all the human race descended from the common parentage of Adam and Eve, and that "God hath made of one blood all nations of men, for to dwell on all the face of the earth" (Acts 17:26). In this sense the whole world is a human family, all men are brothers afar off. But the Bible predicates little of ethics and precepts upon this purely humanitarian ground. Indeed, it would be difficult to find any passage in Scripture which calls upon us to be kind and generous, considerate and sympathetic with man just because he is man, having the same heredity and nature and blood as ourselves. The Bible teaches that fact, but God does not base the gospel and duty upon that truth. There is a treatment which Christ requires us to accord all men because they are "brethren." Our Lord did not say, Thou shalt love **man** as thyself;

nor did He say, Thou shalt love thy **brother** as thyself; but He did say, Thou shalt love thy **neighbor** as thyself. He thus constituted a neighborhood and a brotherhood, and made all that is human the membership of one and all that is Christian the membership of the other. One is universal and race-wide, and the other is limited to his disciples.

All the world is neighbor to the Church, and it must act the Good Samaritan to the ends of the earth. In the spirit of fraternity it must minister to all the household of faith, but in the spirit of Christian neighborliness it must take its gospel and beneficent institutions to the utmost parts of the habitable globe. It must be unneighborly, or it must be evangelistic and missionary. The law of good neighborhood requires it to give of its bread and drink and oil and loving kindness to the fallen in every land.

But the social movement and the new theology which seeks to "articulate" it are not pleased with the Scriptures' assignment of all who are not the disciples of Christ to the class of neighbors. They are dissatisfied with any distinctions made among men for any reason. They are for reducing all the race to a dead level, and for giving all men the same standing with God and other men. Discriminations are hateful. If God is the Father of any, He must be the Father of all. If any are brothers, all must be brothers. Nothing short of the universal brotherhood of all mankind can placate them. It is not neighborly love and brotherly treatment they want, but brotherly love and brotherly treatment they demand, irrespective of the feelings they show and the treatment they give the Lord Jesus.

But it cannot be helped. It ought not to be otherwise. The attitude of men towards Christ and His gospel must and ought to make a difference between men. He is a divider of men. He is a divider of ages. He is a divider of destinies. He separates men into His "friends" and His "enemies." He treats His enemies in a generous and neighborly fashion, but He regards His friends with a special and exuberant brotherly affection. In this respect His disciples may follow His example. History shows that the people of Christ have often been requited with persecution for their neighborly treatment of His critics and opponents. Many who are the beneficiaries of Christian charity and that humanitarian kindness which has been generated by the gospel, are the bitter critics of the Church and traducers of the disciples of the Lord Jesus. Nevertheless our Master says, "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them that despitefully use you, and persecute you; that ye may be (that you

may show yourselves to be) the children of your Father which is in heaven” (Matt. 5:44–45).

The most primary duty we owe to the neighborhood is **justice**. The law is, “Render to all their dues” (Rom. 13:7–10). The neighborhood has no need which can take precedence over justice. It requires that respect which makes us “honor all men” (1 Peter 2:17). It forbids participation in barbarisms which degrade, or in any practices which crush. It requires us to accord to every man his full social rights—reward to whom reward is due, and punishment to whom punishment is due. Each member of society must be allowed, as a matter of right, to live upon the highest ethical plane he may make for himself, and be ruled in all things by the loftiest Christian conscience. Nothing can take the place of social justice, which accords to every member of the neighborhood the right to life, liberty, property, and the pursuit of happiness.

Next to justice comes **truthfulness**, in importance as a neighborhood duty. False-witness bearing, gross lying, spiteful backbiting, injurious gossip, malicious tale-bearing, hurtful tittle-tattle, are horrid transgressions of the law of Christian neighborhood. The tongue of the deceiver and slanderer has done woeful damage to both the smaller and larger neighborhoods of the world. “Speaking the truth in love” (Eph. 4:15) is the rule of Scripture. “Let all bitterness and wrath, and anger, and clamor, and evil speaking, but put away from you, with malice; and be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ’s sake hath forgiven you” (Eph. 4:31–32). Perhaps few indulge in more bitter blackmail than do certain of the socially discontented, who have taken up the idea that the neighborhood is to blame for all their hardships and failures. Falsehood, in all its forms, is an atrocious offence against the most elementary rules of Christian neighborhood.

We owe to the neighborhood, not only justice and truthfulness and all the sterner qualities of conscience and righteousness, but also **sympathy** and the gentler virtues of the heart. A fellow-feeling which carries us into the joys and sorrows of both the local and the wider community; a practical kindness and beneficence which lend a helping hand to every struggling member of the neighborhood; words of cheer that bolster a drooping spirit; a forbearance that can be patient with those whose tempers are irritable, whose conduct is unlovely, and whose speech is unbecoming; a forgiveness which, in the very majesty and sublimity of one who stands upon the steps of God’s throne, can wipe out the injury which has been even wantonly inflicted;—these

are some of the things which would glorify Christian neighborhood, and make it delicious to live in such a community.

Finally, the law of Christian neighborhood requires each member to be an **example** of justice, truth, and goodness to every other member of the community. It is awful to lead another astray—to tempt him to immorality, to misery, to uncharitableness, to that which is dishonorable and vulgar; but doubly damned is he who first introduces the evil custom which casts its blight upon the neighborhood. Every member of a community is a fountain of influence. Cursed is he whose fountain is morally poisoned. The light of eternity will show your finger-marks and mine upon all those with whom we associate. Cicero is quoted as saying, “Be a pattern to others; for as a whole city is infected by the licentious passions and vices of great men, so it is likewise reformed by their moderation.” Each member of the neighborhood must live as he would have the whole neighborhood live. “Man is an imitative creature, and whoever is foremost leads the herd.”

“Honor all men. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the king.”

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R. A. Webb from *Elements of Truth* and a college photograph circa 1877, when about 21 years of age.