

A Call for Biblical Justice

Study Group Report

Cincinnati Area Baptist Association



Say the name of a town like Ferguson, Mo., or speak of Samuel DuBose or Ray Tensing here in Cincinnati and emotions swell. Watch a family in anguish over yet another opioid drug overdose or young adults go another week without a paycheck. It breaks your heart. What if riots break out in Cincinnati as they did in 2001? Would we just sit on the sidelines? Is that God's will for us? Do we turn away from someone or groups of people in crisis? Or do we participate in marches on the streets on every social issue that comes across the TV screen? What's a priority? What do we let go?

What is a follower of Jesus to do? What is the role of the church? My church? Your church? And what does God say about justice issues in His Word?

The Cincinnati Area Baptist Association is a collection of churches choosing to cooperate in all areas, including biblical justice. Note that we aren't just offering a cup of cold water, but a cup of cold water in Jesus' name. Is that a significant difference to you?

As we cooperate, we need to be on the same page when it comes to what the Bible says about people who suffer, who are ignored, shunned, killed, or are in need. Our nine-county association is urban, rural, and suburban. And it is a mosaic of people from rich to poor, white to black, single to married, gay to straight, addicted to free, and many other walks of life looking for answers that the Bible uniquely addresses.

CABA asked four pastors to form a Biblical Justice Study Group in April 2017 and provide a report at its Annual Meeting in October 2017. CABA is indebted to their work and insights that comprise this document. May it serve as a reference; a beginning point, so that our churches can understand the what God expects as we address injustice in our times.

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The Cry

That's not right! That's not fair! I want justice! These are some of the cries heard throughout society today. Those of us who are parents have heard these cries in one form or another from our children. They also arise from all kinds of people of all ages over all kinds of issues. They are not new. These cries for justice and fairness have been with us since the first man and woman. Sometimes they involve great and important matters and sometimes small and trivial issues. But every day, we are confronted with the need to do right, to be fair, and to act justly, and every day we are challenged to respond to being treated poorly, unfairly, and unjustly. It is a part of the human condition and the present fabric of life.

We see this played out in our personal relationships with family, friends, co-workers, and even the strangers we encounter. We see it on a larger scale involving groups, organizations, governments, and nations. We see it in history, and we see it in the Bible from the beginning of Genesis to the end of Revelation. We see the issues of right, fair, and just, in the way individuals relate to one another in the simplest of ways, and we see them in the complexities of systemic unfairness and injustice throughout society. For unrighteous, unfair, and unjust people create unrighteous, unfair and unjust social groups, corporations, governments, etc.

As if it were not difficult enough to find justice, we are now living in a period of great social, moral, and religious upheaval (just to name three of the many areas in transition within and among humans today). The previous consensus on any number of issues is breaking down ways producing conflict, confusion, and even chaos at times. Old standards, values, methodologies, and behaviors are being rejected, abandoned, or changed by an ever-increasing number of people and groups. They are demanding

action, change, and freedom (from past values, morals, beliefs, etc.). Those clamoring for change are being met by what appears to be an equally large number of people wanting to maintain the status quo and keep things as they are, or perhaps, the way they used to be. Neither side is monolithic nor in agreement within themselves, but they are an assortment of groups usually brought together in reaction to some event, crisis, or situation which threatens their security, well-being, or sense of right.

Presently, the individuals and groups wanting change have been lumped together by sociologists, pundits, and the media under the umbrella heading of “social justice”. “Social justice” is popularly defined as the distribution or redistribution of wealth, opportunities, and privileges within a society. Though it sounds as if it was addressing only or mostly economic issues, it actually addresses the entirety of human life. This is not to imply that the social justice movement is in agreement within itself as to the particular values, beliefs, methods, and goals they desire to employ and achieve. But they do agree that they want change, freedom, and justice. Who decides what that means? Who gets to do the distributing or redistributing? What values and beliefs will guide that process? Justice is not ever as easy or as simple as it might sound. This is especially true in times of extreme change like these.

Social Justice and Biblical Justice

We need to approach the concerns of the social justice movement with a level of objectivity. We need to look at the issue and the particulars of the circumstances first, and not at the crowd pointing them out. To do otherwise would be prejudicial, short-sighted, and would play right into the hands of Satan, who always seeks to separate and, ultimately, to steal, kill, and destroy. Yes, we must consider the aims and purposes of the crowd, but right is right and wrong is wrong. This can get very complex, convoluted, even messy, but we must have the wisdom of Solomon if we are to be wise and discerning. Solomon and other wise people of the Bible received their wisdom from the same source that we can receive ours. Our situation as Christians is most demanding. For we must speak, not only to the issue, but also to those who raise it, even if we disagree with their values, goals, and methods in raising it. Perhaps, we should also shift from “talking to” to “talking with”. Treating other humans created by the same God in the same image with respect might go a long way in getting a hearing. Even if it doesn’t, it is the right thing to do. It is what Jesus did! “Come let us reason together!”

The purpose of this paper is not, however, to analyze the “social justice” movement, which is so large, complex, and diverse as to almost defy analysis, especially in a short paper. Our purpose is to listen and to respond to the cries for that which is right, fair, and just with a biblical answer and model, and then to call Christians and churches to embrace, exemplify, and implement what the Bible says we are to be and to do in terms of justice. We need to listen to the world, but more to God, lest we be carried away with the world in a direction that will produce anything but justice.

There is another voice crying out for justice that needs to be heard. It is the voice of God Himself speaking through His Word, the Bible, and His people, the church. No one wants things and people made right and just more than God does, and no one hates unrighteousness, unfairness, and injustice more than God does. The God of the Bible is, in fact, revealed as the God of righteousness and justice from Genesis to Revelation. In the Old Testament, the Hebrew words for righteousness (*tzedek*) and justice (*mishpat*) are used together dozens of times and often used interchangeably. “Justice” can be defined as doing what is “right” and making sure that what is “right” comes to pass. “Right” is never just an abstract principle, philosophical point of view, or even an act or set of behaviors. Biblically, righteousness is a relational and personal term describing that attribute or characteristic of who God is. What is right flows from who God is, how He acts, and how He relates to humans, especially His children. If we want to know what is right, fair, and just, we study the Bible, and we see how these terms are defined by God’s words, actions, and expectations of human beings.

But humans do not know, understand, and comply with God’s definitions, values, and expectations. As Christians, we should not be surprised by this. We know that humans, including ourselves, have been

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infected by a terrible disease called sin. Sin always leads to death, not just at the end, but all along the way. Death in the Bible is not annihilation; it is “separation”. When we die physically, our spirit/soul is separated from our bodies, not extinguished or destroyed. Likewise, the second death does not result in annihilation or ceasing to be; we live on, eternally separated from God. But separation/death began much earlier in our lives; sin has been with us from our beginning.

Separated from God, the human spirit dies. Oh, it continues to exist, but it is not really living as it was created to live. The human soul (heart, mind, will, body, etc.) begins to disintegrate. Without the presence of God, we worship ourselves and become self-centered and selfish. Our thinking becomes corrupted, as do our feelings. Our wills become enslaved to sin itself. Our bodies deteriorate even as they cry for

The conscience;

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satisfaction and pleasure. Most importantly, for this paper, our consciences become seared or deadened altogether, or they become misinformed or conditioned by circumstances or society to function in any number of ways, contrary to their purpose as designed by God.

Now the conscience is that faculty or ability given to us by God to be able to know right from wrong, good from bad, righteousness from sin. The conscience, when alive and functioning correctly, enables us to know, discern, and exercise judgement (justice functioning) on ourselves, approving or disapproving our motives, words, actions, thoughts, goals, methods, etc. It was meant to be God’s voice to our soul, at least before sin marred and corrupted it. Conscience was also meant to guide us not only in how we looked at ourselves, but in how we looked at others, but sin has greatly altered this as well.

Sin not only separates us from God and causes the disintegration of our souls, it separates us from each other. What are the results? Divorce, child abuse, abortion, anger, jealousy, resentment, bitterness, and the list is long. Ironically, many of the injustices that the “social justice” movement speaks about are on that list: hunger, poverty, racism, war, genocide, greed, prejudice and discrimination of every kind (separations and divisions because of nationality, color of skin, age, gender, sexuality, socio-economic class, and religion). Again, the list is long and getting longer. Fear, anger, hopelessness, resentment, and, eventually, violence or retreat from society occur, and the suffering, separation, and death continue to increase.

But the God of righteousness and justice has something to say about that. Throughout the Old Testament, God, through His prophets, promised to make right the mess we humans have created through our sinfulness. His promise goes even deeper than our actions, words, and human relationships. As Jeremiah put it,

“This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time, “declares the Lord. “I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach His neighbor, or a man his brother, saying ‘Know the Lord’, because they will all know me, from the least of these to the greatest”, declares the Lord. “For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.” (Jeremiah 31:33-34)

God promises, more than just information and reformation, to transform us by giving us new hearts, new minds, new natures, and new relationships, not only with God but, ultimately, within ourselves and with our fellow man.

In Christ Jesus, He has done that very thing. Jesus, the Righteous One of God, comes from the Father, fulfills all righteousness, forgives our sins, and begins a process of transformation of individuals and society, whereby those who trust and follow Him are changed from rebellious sinners to obedient saints by the grace and power of God. He is able to do this because He has been appointed and authorized, as well as anointed and empowered by God the Father to do so. He is able to do this because He is Son of God, Son of Man/Adam, Son of David, King of Kings, the eternal great High Priest of Heaven, the Living Word speaking forth the truth of God, the Prince of Peace, and so much more. His coming is an act of revelation to show us who He is, has always been, and forever will be. It is also an act of righteousness and justice, whereby God Himself satisfies His own righteous demands and secures our justification, sanctification, and glorification in Christ Jesus.

As we look at what God has done, is doing, and will do, we not only see His righteousness and justice, we also see His great love, mercy, compassion, and grace. In Exodus 34: 6-7, God reveals Himself to Moses as “The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands and forgiving wickedness, rebellion, and sin. Yet, He does not leave the guilty unpunished. In the New Testament, we hear the familiar, “For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him” (John 3:16-17). God does not hate, but loves sinners/the world, and He desires to save them and not condemn and destroy them.

Scripture passages not only show us what Jesus is like, but what we are supposed to be like.

We find in Jesus Christ, not only righteousness and mercy, but also humility. Jesus invites us to “take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls (Matthew 11:29). The Apostle Paul describes Jesus this way,

“Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross!”

These passages not only show us what Jesus is like, but what we are supposed to be like. This especially holds true when it comes to righteousness, mercy, and humility, and most especially, when it comes to the cries today about that which is right, fair, and just.

The prophet Micah put it this way, “He has shown you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8). This is the key to biblical justice. This is the answer to the cries for social justice (Romans 3:9-18, 5:12-14, 7:7-25). When we consider that Jesus fulfilled God’s requirements expressed by Micah, and Jesus now expects that we, as His followers, do the same, we have our response to the world. We respond as Christians!

The Response Required of Christians

But responding as Christians is not as easy or simple as it sounds, especially in America. For decades, if not centuries, we have considered ourselves a Christian nation. Ask almost any American what religion they are, and the answer would have been “Christian”. Our beliefs, values, and traditions as Christians were at least nominally held by most Americans, but this is increasingly untrue. In fact, we are also discovering that many in our churches, whether members or attenders, are only nominal Christians, at best. Where church ends and world begins is increasingly difficult to discern. This holds true in every area of life, but especially in the area of social justice.

Ironically, and tragically, we are on the verge in this paper of committing one of the great “societal sins” of our age. We are very close to judging one another, and that, according to the world, is the worst sin of all. The world says: Who are you to judge? Who are you to condemn or approve? Who are you to force your opinions and values on others? This is America. We are all equal. Christianity and its’ beliefs, values, and practices is just one religion among many, and it has no right to dictate to the rest of the nation how it should think and live and besides, you Christians are a bunch of hypocrites: holier than thou, sanctimonious, self-righteous, secretly living like sinners, condemnatory, negative, and mean-spirited are among numerous other complaints and criticisms.

Unfortunately, the world’s complaints and criticisms concerning Christians are too often true, or at least partially true. When the criticisms are valid, they should be acknowledged, repented of, and remedied. On the other hand, these complaints and criticisms by the world can also be nothing but lies, excuses, misperceptions, misrepresentations, and caricatures. As was mentioned in the biblical and theological section, all people, Christian and non-Christian, are created by God and still bear God’s image

to some degree. Hopefully, none of us is as evil as we could be and realistically, none of us, Christians included, are as good, wise, and just as we ought to be. Therefore, non-Christians' criticisms and cries need to be listened to, treated with respect as fellow humans and responded to with wisdom, grace, and patience. Using Micah's guidelines, Christians and churches need to respond to ills and injustices, both real and imaginary, by being just, merciful, and humble. The true saints of God have always acted imperfectly, for sure. This is how our King acted and acts today, and this is what He requires of us who are truly Christians.

Real biblical justice requires good biblical theology, biblical living, biblical evangelism, biblical discipleship, and biblical engagement with the world. We have already quickly looked at biblical theology

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focusing in a cursory manner on some of the doctrines most closely related to biblical justice. The challenge is to put the good words of scripture into good practices, so that we who are Christian can faithfully represent Jesus Christ constantly and consistently. But to do that, we must return to scripture, not just to argue for its authority, but to embrace its great living truths.

We must live them out in the power of the Holy Spirit, in the resurrection power promised by Christ to His followers (John 14:15-31, Luke 24:44-49, Philippians 3:8-15). The presence and power is available today, but is too seldom understood, appropriated and lived out by us. We are called to be like our Master, the Lord Jesus. His earthly life and ministry was characterized by submission (humility), the anointing of the Holy Spirit, righteousness, mercy, and bold witness. But our lives and witness must be consistent with who we are, and not just a facade or a religious pretense. We must be real, transparent, and genuinely Christian from the inside out.

This will only happen when we return to biblical evangelism and discipleship. It would appear that our evangelism has ignored or only given lip service to repentance from sin - all sin. It is impossible to experience forgiveness, especially from God, unless there is genuine repentance. For how can we come to saving faith in the grace and power of the God, who not only forgives sin, but also makes the sinner clean, righteous, and just and makes the conscience alive, if there is no real heartrending, soul-searching, sin-confessing, and sin-abandoning cry to God for mercy in humble and sincere repentance? It is not right! It is not fair! It is not just to think we can receive God's mercy and still cling to our sins, or deep down deny we have any. Perhaps, some of the charges of the world about us being pretenders, game players, and hypocrites have some merit after all. We must be thoroughly and truly converted, if we are to bear witness with integrity and power.

We must also have a discipleship that teaches sanctification, as well as justification, and being changed, as well as forgiven. Christians must be taught the importance and necessity of learning ("Take my yoke upon you and learn from me" (Matthew 11:29), training in righteousness (II Timothy 3:16), and discipline, by self and by church. Real repentance leads to real faith, which produces spiritual fruit, growth in grace, and maturity. Sin and injustice is not acceptable in our lives, in our families, or in our churches. Christians, especially new ones, must be taught and trained to mortify our flesh, separate ourselves from sin of all kinds, and how to be in the world, but not of it. Likewise, we must exhibit and exemplify the peace and joy of loving obedience to our Master, indwelt and filled with His Spirit, and whole-heartedly devoted to building His Kingdom and glorifying His Name.

Sin and injustice is not acceptable in our lives, in our families, in our churches

We are witnessing today a clash of ideologies and world views. Whether it be over "social justice" or any number of other issues, too many Christians and churches are ill taught and ill equipped to be engaged in the struggle. Too many capitulate and go the way of the world. Others retreat behind the walls of their homes or churches thinking the battle will pass them by or they will pass on before they are brought into it. Many are afraid and turn to anger and the hurt and death that it produces. None of these reactions are the response that God would have us choose.

We must realize that this is a clash of kingdoms: the kingdom of this world under its prince, Satan, versus the Kingdom of God/Heaven, under the leadership of our Lord and King, Jesus Christ. The battle is real. Once again, ignoring it, or pretending it's not going on, is not the answer. Neither is fighting in the way the world fights, and in the process, becoming more like the world than citizens of the Kingdom of Christ. When our Lord walked the earth in the flesh, He faced the same situations. We should face them as He did. He refused to call down fire to consume those who rejected Him. Jesus did not see the world as something to be hated, but loved and saved. "When He saw the crowd, He had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd" (Matthew 9:36). They are winnable, or at least Jesus thought they were, and well worth the prayers and the effort (Matthew 9:37-38).

But where are the shepherds crying out today for righteousness, mercy, and humility like our Master, bearing witness for Him to the sinners of the world, victims and perpetrators alike? Jesus never approved of sin, and neither should we, but neither did He fail to associate with sinners and stand up for them, like He did for the woman taken in adultery recorded in John 8:1-11. What a surprising and instructive lesson in justice and mercy is found there!

For our ultimate example in justice, as in all things, is Jesus. He was constantly watched and put to the test by foes and friends. One day, Jesus was teaching a crowd of people in the temple courts, when the Pharisees and teachers of the law (the most religious people of His time and day) brought a woman taken in the very act of adultery. We might ask, where was the man she was involved with? (The social justice movement would see this as yet another example of gender inequality.) The scriptures do not tell us. Perhaps, he was fast, and escaped. Most probably, he would have been recognized (the charge of adultery would have required it) and quickly apprehended. Perhaps he was let go, but we do not know and great caution must always be exercised in conjecturing and possibly reading into God's Word our own thoughts and feelings. Jesus did not even go there, as important as the question might be. Jesus focused on the woman who was about to face a quick trial and execution by stoning.

***Our ultimate example
in justice is Jesus***

Jesus fully understood the situation. It was a trap. The situation was real especially for the woman, who was being used by a group of people in hopes of undermining and overthrowing the person and ministry of Jesus by putting Him in an unwinnable position. The woman was guilty. Humiliation, by being forced to stand in the presence of Jesus and the crowd, was not enough. The law of Moses demanded her death by stoning. What was Jesus to do? If He said, in mercy, to "let her go", He would be in conflict with the law and its demands. If He said, "stone her", the law would be fulfilled, putting Him at odds with the Roman authorities who forbade independent Jewish justice and/or mob violence.

The law and its application is important to Jesus. He, the Father, and the Holy Spirit, gave it to Moses. The law reveals the character of God. It is, as Paul described it, "holy, righteous, and good". Jesus is the embodiment and full revelation of the law. He lived it out perfectly. But people are also important to Jesus: the woman, the crowd, her accusers, even the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, are all important to Him. So Jesus stoops down and begins to write something in the dirt with His finger. Hopefully, in heaven we will know what it was. When the crowd would not let up, He stood up and told them, "If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her". Then He stooped down and continued to write.

Now, the law of Moses did not require that executions be carried out by sinlessly-perfect people. If it had, justice could never be carried out and lawlessness would prevail. Someone in the crowd could have pointed this out to Jesus and let the stones fly, but they did not. It is not too much to presume that it was the presence of the Lord and the movement and work of the Holy Spirit that day, that turned the tide. The crowd began to melt away "one at a time", beginning with the oldest, until only Jesus and the woman are left. (We might ask, where are the "elders" of today? Why are they not taking the lead and speaking out? Why are they not being listened to by the younger generations? These are also questions of what is right, fair, and just within today's church and, ultimately, in the world.)

When they were all gone, Jesus asked the woman, "Where are they? Has no one condemned you?" "No one, sir", she said. Jesus said, "Then neither do I condemn you". Jesus had not abrogated nor denied

the laws' right requirements and just consequences. Nor did He teach that mercy trumps righteousness. Both righteousness and mercy are to be found in God equally and inseparably. But the accusers' charges had been dropped. The woman was still guilty, but not condemned. Therefore, Jesus warns and encourages her to "Go now and leave your life of sin". Worthy of death, she is given another opportunity for life. For, as Jesus taught elsewhere, "God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him". Yes, we stand condemned already (John 3:18), but today is the day of salvation!

Condemnation seems the theme for our present day. The greater part of the "social justice" movement often blames and condemns Christians and churches for many of the injustices of today. Or, at least, they fault Christians and churches for not standing up and taking part in an effort to correct these injustices they oppose. Christians and churches often condemn those in the social justice movement *en mass* without considering the merits of their complaints, or the presence of many good people, including Christians, in their ranks. There is way too much heat and not enough light, too much crying out and not enough real listening, too much arrogance and self-righteousness and not enough humility and mercy on either side. (Actually, many sides, because of the complexity of the issues involved.) "Blessed are the peacemakers" (Matthew 5:9) has never been so true and so needed.

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The world cannot save itself from itself. If we do not speak up on all matters, including justice, who will? We must be people of justice ourselves, merciful and humble, to gain a hearing, to have an influence, and then to withstand the opposition, ridicule, and sometimes the persecution that comes when anyone dares to stand in the way of the demands of the world. When they use the term justice correctly and appropriately, we should join the chorus, if not lead the band. But what the world wants is not always justice, even when they use the word. Too often the world wants freedom, but not freedom as Christians know it. Actually, they too often desire license and abandonment of true biblical values and virtues. Their idea of freedom always leads to enslavement to the flesh, worldliness, and Satan. The world wants change, but in the wrong direction. There are many injustices and wrongs in our world, even in Christians and churches which need to be acknowledged, addressed, and changed. But the right change in the right way is necessary, and the world is generally incapable of bringing it about.

The world's frustration with the reluctance and even refusal by many to make good changes is understandable. We must push positive and godly change forward. Many told Martin Luther King to be patient, to be understanding, not to push things. But sometimes we have to ask, how long do we wait to make things right? Yes, pushing change can be counter-productive, dangerous, and even wrong, but sometimes, delaying can be, too. We need God's wisdom on the many issues of injustice today, and we need patience among other Christian virtues, but we also need godly agents of change acting to make the world a better place for all people. The world wants acceptance, approval, applause, and eventually, participation with them in their values, pursuits, and behaviors. Christians must not do this, or even give the appearance of doing so, as popular as it might be. Finally, the ultimate aim of the world is power and victory. They may not even realize that, but we should as Christians. Once again, this is spiritual warfare between two kingdoms, totally opposite in nature and unequivocally opposed to one another. This is sin, moved beyond individual sins and sinners, to the level of systemic corruption. Scripturally, it is called dominion/thrones, authority, and power, the hierarchy of evil under the control of the Prince of Darkness, Satan. These are the last enemies, along with death, that Christ will defeat just before or at His return (Ephesians 6:12, Hebrews 10:13). The battle goes on, and will continue to do so until then. We have no choice as Christians but to resist and promote the cause of Christ in this battle for the minds, hearts and lives of people everywhere.

Action Informed by Scripture

Jesus and the saints of old, both in the Bible and throughout history, have had to stand where we are today, upholding righteousness, holiness, and godliness, while extending grace, mercy, and compassion to those opposed to God and us, His servants, followers, and children. We must speak truth in love to those who reject, defame, attack, persecute, and even kill the people of God. We must love the people of the world, as God Himself does. We must pray “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do”. We must respect all of our fellow humans, even the non-Christians, even if they don’t respect us. We must stop being afraid and reacting with anger and hate. We must be Christlike in every and all situations and conditions. We must rid our lives and churches of racism, bigotry of all kinds, self-righteousness, judgementalism, favoritism, hard-heartedness, unconcern, and selfishness.

These are lessons saints of the Old and New Testaments had to continually learn and be reminded of. Jonah did not want to preach to the Ninevites, because they were of a different nationality and enemies of the Jewish nation. Simon Peter did not want to associate with Gentiles, or at least appear to do so in public in a clear act of prejudice and racism, and he was not only a Christian, but also an Apostle. Christians do not always do the right thing, but when we don’t, we should, as Jonah and Peter did, repent and do justice.

As noted above, all humans need changed hearts in order to become what we were originally designed to be, and have been saved by Jesus Christ to become. Changed hearts result in changed lives, which grow and mature in Christlikeness daily. God, in the Old Testament, is described as being

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righteous, just, merciful, and humble (among many other characteristics/attributes). The New Testament describes God’s Son in similar terminology. And, most importantly, for this paper, Jesus’ followers are continually described as ideally being righteous, holy, and godly. These are the results and evidence of God being at work in our lives. Therefore, Christians, like our Lord, are to treat people right, not just outwardly to be seen, but from the heart, irrespective of how we are treated or responded to – no hypocrisy or pretense allowed. And

this is not to be just toward people we like, or who are like us, but toward all people equally - no exceptions. We are not to be motivated by self-interest, selfish desires, or self-righteousness, but by love (toward Jesus and mankind) and a genuine desire to be a blessing in life, as much as to be blessed. To follow Jesus means we do not spend all of our time and energy fighting for our own rights and privileges, while ignoring, or worse yet, exacerbating the conditions and situations of our fellow men and women, who may be experiencing injustice and mistreatment.

When Moses gave God’s people His laws, He made it clear that there should be absolutely no favoritism shown to anyone regardless of status: rich should not be treated better than poor, poor better than rich. For the New Testament parallel, read the letter of James. The powerful are not to receive preferential treatment over the weak, or the weak over the powerful. In each and every case, justice is to be blind, like our modern statues of Lady Justice. The merits of the case are to decide the outcome, not the personalities involved. On the other hand, God through Moses, made it equally clear that certain types of people were at a disadvantage in this life, not necessarily through any fault of their own: the widow, the orphan, the poor, and the alien. He demanded that provision be made for these people. Recognizing they were vulnerable to sinful, powerful people and institutions, the prophets reaffirmed this time and again in their calls for righteousness and justice, enlarging those who need special care to include the weak and oppressed. Jesus went even farther as He spoke of the special needs of the hungry, the thirsty, the imprisoned, the naked, all the way to the “least of these”. Significantly, the scriptures do not regard these actions as acts of mercy, but as acts of righteousness. To treat the mistreated correctly, we must be aware of them, feel responsible for them, and stand with them, as well as for them, not as an act of pity, but because it is the right thing to do.

The difficulty and challenge of doing justice is clearly illustrated in the Bible. No “justice” issue is more discussed than the one concerning the care of widows. Throughout the Old Testament, we are commanded by God to take care of widows. Constantly, the prophets condemned their neglect as a great

sin. Likewise, the New Testament teaches the necessity of it. One of the last acts of Jesus as the eldest son is to make sure His widowed mother will be cared for by John. When we come to the Book of Acts not long after, we find a spirit-filled church divided over the care of widows. Divided by language and national origins, among other issues, the Grecian widows and their supporters cried out about the unfairness and injustice of their treatment, care and provision. And the church, led by the Holy Spirit, responded wisely and quickly, to remedy the situation. Later on, the church under the leadership of Paul had to take further action concerning the care of widows because some were taking advantage of the church's rules concerning their care. The church then began to distinguish between widows and widows "indeed" – women who had no close relatives to care for them. It is not easy being "fair" within a church; how much more so when dealing with non-believers. Still, it must be done!

Real Christians are to do the right thing, whether it is easy, pleasing, popular, profitable, or even reasonable. If Jesus died for us, the just for the unjust, how may we do any less and call ourselves Christians? This attitude found in Christ, and expected of us, must be at the center of who we are and how we live daily. For every day, we encounter people and situations which tax our resolve and ability to be righteous, merciful and humble. God's love, wisdom, strength, and courage are required to be able to approach each person with the right attitude, desires, and goals, but we must do so as witnesses, ambassadors, and advocates. Sometimes people complain they are being treated unfairly and unjustly, when they are not. Disagreeing is much more difficult than going along, but we must do so. There is no reason that we must be disagreeable, argumentative, arrogant, stubborn, unfeeling, uncaring, and a host of other attitudes and behaviors identified and condemned in the scriptures. Then there are those with legitimate complaints, who need to be helped with wisdom and grace.

Conclusion

If there ever was a time for prophetic preaching joined with pastoral ministry, this is it. Before we can effectively address justice biblically in the public square, we must address it with Christians gathered in churches (I Peter 4:1-19, I Timothy 4:1-16, I Timothy 2:1-4:8, Titus 2:11-3:8). If we are to endure opposition, criticism, and even persecution, we must be ready for it. The work of the churches, but especially the shepherds, is to get the church ready with faithful, biblical preaching, evangelism, discipleship, and living.

Ours is not to be only a defensive strategy. On occasion that may be necessary, but normally, and even in abnormal times, we are to be on the offensive, but not intentionally offensive to the world. Discernment is always necessary here. It is impossible not to offend the world if we are what we should be and do what we should do. The message of the cross is by definition offensive to the world (Luke 2:34-35, Galatians 5:11, 6:12-14, I Corinthians 1:18-25), but it is the only message we have that comes from God and works. In our living, witnessing, and preaching, we must make sure it is the message of the cross of Christ that offends, and not we who present it. Once again, God requires that we be faithful followers, witnesses, ambassadors, and advocates who represent Him well in righteousness, holiness, godliness, grace, and love in our lives and in our churches. We must identify, confess, and remove all those sinful attitudes, behaviors, habits, traditions, hateful words, haughty looks, whining, complaining, negativity, self-pity, and whatever else that not only offends the world, but the Savior of it. We are called and commanded to go into the world with the gospel of Jesus Christ. We must have the gospel preparation and readiness and the full armor of Christ to do so (Ephesians 6:10-20). We must go in grace, faith, and love. Too many of us live and abide in legalism, fear, and anger, if not hate. The world sees it. Ironically, and tragically, many in the world, though still lost, like and even love Jesus; they just can't stand us. Yes, their perceptions and judgements are terribly affected by sin, but too often, their judgements are too on target for comfort. If the world must say all manner of evil about us, we must make sure the charges are false. In the early days of the church as described in Acts, the non-believing world did say several insightful things and positive things about the early believers and the church: they took note that the Christians had been with Jesus, they acknowledged how the church loved, they saw the disciples' boldness and their courage, and they witnessed their whole-hearted commitment to Jesus Christ as Lord. May those days come again soon.

As the church moves into the world, we will need all of the wisdom, courage, and strength that God can give. The Bible affirms that all we need in every area of life is available in Jesus (Hebrews 4:14-16). When the world cries out for justice, we must not only hear, but also respond as Christians. In fact, in many situations, we should be taking the lead, making sure the voice of God is heard clearly and accurately above that of the world. God has much to say about the justice issues of the day, and He has answers for questions, healing for wounds, solutions to problems. It is beyond the scope of this paper to deal with each of the various “justice” issues individually and at length, but we must address them, and do so biblically. The world will, for the most part, not like or agree with our assessment, values, methods, and proposals. We must stand with God, and stand with the hurting people of the world.

Each day we can make a difference in the world. We can be just people. We can take a stand for and with unjustly treated people. We can, through our churches, denominations, and other groups of Christians speak out against and take on the systemic evils of our day. Historically, Christians have come together to end slavery, promote education, establish religious liberty, oppose segregation, establish hospitals, and etc. We must do likewise, and we must do more, not to satisfy the world, but to satisfy the Lord. Justice demands it! Jesus demands it!

“But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream.”

Amos 5:24

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For further reading: (with appreciation to Michael Clary, pastor, Christ the King, Uptown)

Bridges Out of Poverty: Strategies for Professionals and Communities, Ruby K. Paine and others, aha! Process, Inc., 2009 revised edition. Notes: It is not a Christian resource, but it is well researched and very helpful for understanding poverty culture as distinguished from middle class and wealth culture. For example, there are “hidden rules” that each class learns intuitively but is not known by other classes. People in poverty don’t know the hidden rules of the middle class which makes it very difficult for them to be able to navigate the world of money.

Counter Culture: Because We Are Called to Counter Culture in a World of Poverty, Same-Sex Marriage, Racism, Sex Slavery, Immigration, David Platt, Tyndale House, 2015. Platt presents the problem or issue raging in American society (from a global perspective). He then presents God’s viewpoint using Scripture and biblical insights, and then challenges followers of Jesus to not only be transformed, but get involved.

Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America, Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, Oxford University Press, 2001. This is the best primer for evangelicals to read about race in the USA.

Ministries of Mercy: The Call of the Jericho Road, Tim Keller, P&R Publishers, 3rd Edition, 2015

When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty Without Hurting the Poor...and Yourself, by Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert, Moody Publishers, New edition, 2014. Solidly evangelical perspective on poverty ministry.

Recommendations

Mark Snowden

1. Conduct a “town hall” gathering in your church around the issue of Biblical Justice. Ask many of the questions raised in this document. Use the following questions to spark discussion.
 - a) What does the Bible say about justice?
 - b) What happens when man’s laws and God’s laws contradict?
 - c) How should our church respond to injustice? How much is too much? How much is not enough? What examples can you celebrate? Which opportunities did you miss?
 - d) What steps should each member take when they encounter injustice? What should they do personally? What should this church do corporately?
 - e) What examples can you identify of injustice in our society at large, this community in which our church ministers, and in your circle of influence? Which conflict with the Bible? Which issues must not be tolerated? What issues require breaking the law?
2. It is recommended that pastors provide electronic or printed copies of this paper to church leaders. Check online at www.cincinnatiabaptist.com for a PDF file. Or request a copy from CABAoffice@gmail.com. Consider preaching or leading a Bible study on Biblical Justice, using this paper as a guide. Invite volunteers who would form a task force that would begin to address issues identified by your church members. Seek to address issues with leaders and influences in this community and beyond.
3. Distribute the names and addresses of your community’s elected officials. Stay informed and write these leaders about issues that conflict with God’s Word.
4. Seek to develop a relationship with state and local officials. Express appreciation for their public service, but seek to be a peacemaker and bring reconciliation to tensions that currently exist.
5. Ask your mayor, county manager, or other chief leader to name three “impossible” needs in your community. Mobilize others to address those needs, which might range from providing after school programs for teens to painting an old train depot. Seek to be a witness and prove yourself reliable and trustworthy. Your actions will speak loudly when issues arise that need to be addressed from a biblical perspective. Yes, off that cup of cold water, but be sure it is done in Jesus’ name.
6. Identify and address needs among immigrant groups that have little if any evangelical witness. Seek to not only evangelize them, but help them to establish churches. In some cases, it may be best to invite them to worship in your church’s facilities.
7. Pray for “kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence. For this *is* good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior” (1 Timothy 2:2-3 NKJV).