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GOSPEL PROCLAMATION AND SOCIAL JUSTICE: ARE THE TWO RELATED?: A BIBLICAL REFLECTION¹

Dr. Dauda Andrawus Gava

West Africa Theological Seminary, Lagos State, Nigeria

Email: gavakanadi@yahoo.com

Abstract

This article focused on the issue of social justice from the Biblical perspective. It was discovered that social justice has been part of biblical teaching right from, the Old Testament. The New Testament supports this through the gospel proclamation. It is clear that social justice has been in the heart of God to his people. In turn, the people are required to imbibe social justice wherever they are. The paper adopts historical and analytical methods of research regarding data analyses. The article however, emphasizes justice to the poor, downtrodden and exploited ones. The paper therefore, recommends that social justice should be practiced in governmental and non-governmental organisations, schools and churches in order to have a better society. This can achieve through the Gospel Proclamation to various countries of the world.

Keywords: Social, Justice, Downtrodden, Proclamation, Biblical, New Testament

Introduction

The concept of social justice has been studied widely. It is an area that has been addressed from different perspectives including the political, economic and judicial point of views. In this paper, I will be looking at social justice from the Gospel proclamation perspective. While focusing on the New Testament gospels, the Old Testament concept of justice has given the background required. The terms “*tsedeqah*,” “*mishpat*” are seen as 'primary justice' When the prophets called for justice to "roll down like waters" and admonished

the people to "do justice," they used a particular Hebrew word: *tsedeqah*. This word came from a root meaning "straight" in the physical sense, and it came to mean something that conformed to its standard."² As *tsedeqah* became a legal term, it came to mean the abstract standard of behavior which should govern humans in their relationships with each other, with nature, and with God.³ The New Testament affirms the same standard, but teaches that it was embodied in a person, Jesus Christ.' It is often said that the ethics of the Old Testament concentrates upon justice , while those of the New Testament concentrate on love. This way of describing the difference between the two Testaments can be misleading to people who do not know that the two great commandments of the Christian Gospels, to love God and to love our neighbor, are quotations from the Pentateuch. In fact, the Old Testament in fact refers far more frequently to love than to justice.⁴ The common terms in the New Testament for justice/righteousness are "*dikaioisune*", "*dikaiois*", "*dikaio*" and the negative "*adikia*". Therefore, this chapter concentrates on Biblical Social Justice and Gospel Proclamation.

The Meaning of Social Justice from Biblical Perspective

Several writers have presented different understandings of social justice even from the biblical point of view. I looked at a few definitions in order to guide this article. "The mission of social justice identifies disadvantaged groups, not individuals, as the target for social and economic equality."⁵ It is also, " a normative concept centered on the notion of fairness and the principles of equality, equity, rights and participation,"⁶ According to Collins, the issue of social justice is a diversion from the primary work of Jesus. The work of Jesus based on his understanding is centered on the cross. Says Collins, "The message of social justice diverts attention from Jesus and the cross. It turns our hearts and minds from things above to things on this earth. It obscures the promise of forgiveness for hopeless sinners by telling them they are hapless victims of other's misdeeds."⁷ While the emphasis on the centrality of the cross is quite correct, teaching and proclaiming the word was not the only thing Jesus did in his ministry. Jesus in many instances was concerned

about social justice in his time. Meeting the needs of the poor and downtrodden was prominent in the work that Jesus did. “Jesus equates using our resources to meet the needs of the poor to preparing a valuable, inexhaustible and secure treasure in heaven.”⁸ In fact, the public ministry of Jesus begins in earnest in Luke 4 with Jesus' reading in the synagogue at Nazareth from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. Noteworthy is the mention in this passage of preaching the good news to the poor. Here as elsewhere, the author of the Gospel of Luke clearly works from the assumption that the poor and marginalized will most readily embrace the challenging proclamation of Jesus.⁹

Where there is no justice, life will not flourish. “When justice is pervasively trampled upon, the very fabric of ...society crumbles.”¹⁰ In the life and ministry of Jesus, it is seen that “Jesus constantly pushes against the boundaries of his society, stretching them to allow more people to be embraced by God's compassion, grace, and forgiveness. Jesus not only challenges his disciples to care for the poor and marginalized, he commands them to open their homes to the poor, the blind, the maimed, and the outcast.”¹¹ Where justice was not done or shown, Jesus reacted against such. An example could be seen during his visit to the temple. “The matter of justice and righteousness is surely part of Jesus' angry denunciation of temple polity in his well-known demonstration in the temple precincts. The implications of his appeal to Isa 6:7 and Jer 7:11 would have been hard to miss: “Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations'? But you have made it a 'cave of robbers'” (Mark 11:17).”¹²

It is evident that biblical teachings emphasize issues of justice. Justice is an obligation of all believers. Where there is justice, there is peaceful coexistence. This is seen in the Old Testament where Israelites were requested to treat foreigners with kindness. “The Bible requires that Christians, as well as humans in general, be preoccupied with the concern for justice and be willing to do all things in their ability to guarantee that foreigners are handled with

sympathy by the lawful and legitimate structure of their society (Ex 23:1–8; Lv 19:35f.; Dt 16:18–28).”¹³

There cannot be good news without caring for the needs of humanity. “Social justice is commonly associated with the creation of a just society, with the underlying assumption that justice implies human welfare through equal rights and share of benefits, fair treatment, recognition of cultural differences, and equitable access to resources and opportunities.”¹⁴ In the Old Testament, social justice received much attention from the prophets. “The concept of social justice is important for the theology of the prophets. While it did not originate there, the prophetic literature upholds Yahweh's standard of justice—pointing out its neglect and abuse.”¹⁵

Justice also begins in creation. God is justice. Justice is there in all he does. Sometimes it is difficult to see justice in the activity of God that affects us negatively from our perspective. “Genesis 3: 1–24 describes the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden for having infringed the Creator's order not to eat the fruit from the forbidden tree. Genesis 18: 20–33 and 19: 1–28, in the context of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, considers the number of just men required to prevent its occurrence and whether a single just man in those cities would be sufficient to avoid their destruction.”¹⁶

All that God requires is justice. This is presented by Prophet Micah “And what does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God?” (6:8). Prophet Amos emphasized the same, “God cares and provides, reciprocity, people are to do same. Amos 5.24 popular verse. When someone does not materially respond to the needs of people around them—they do not have the love of God.”¹⁷ It is seen that “Jesus, in his teaching, addressed the economic manifestation of social injustice by targeting its root in human intentions – excessive fear for personal security and the resulting avarice with regard to material goods.”¹⁸

Jesus' incarnation serves as humility. This led him to care for humanity by giving himself to death. “Fundamentally, the gospel is

the good news that the eternal Son of God entered our sinful world and lived a life of perfect obedience to the Father, died as a sacrifice in the place of sinners, and rose triumphantly from death as a sign of sin's defeat and the Father's acceptance."¹⁹ But there are others with the opinion that social justice is quite different from the gospel or good news. Gospel proclamation should be seen as the end result of social justice. Social justice in itself is not a gospel.

"But here's the tension again: we may not substitute social justice for spiritual transformation. While our heart for social justice grows out of the gospel, social justice by itself will not communicate the gospel. We need gospel proclamation, for as much as people may see our good deeds, they cannot hear the good news unless we tell them. Social justice, though valuable as an expression of Christian love, should, especially as a church-wide endeavor, serve the goal of gospel proclamation."²⁰

Another perspective is that "In the Bible, concern for justice often involves a reversal of fortune, a bringing down of the rich, who gained their wealth by exploiting others, and a lifting up of the poor, who suffered so much injustice. This reversal is clear in places like Psalm 107:33-43 and Psalm 113."²¹ But that is not the general concept of biblical teaching on justice or social justice. It does not talk always about reversal. The issue of reversal are only a few instances. "Biblical social justice is living in just and righteous relationships with one another. It does not simply require the righting of wrongs, but also generosity and social concern, especially for the poor and vulnerable."²² The expectation is that those highly placed in the society should show justice and practice social justice. "The idea is that those with social power in Israel are to render justice to the vulnerable bottom ones as a public remembrance, as a memorial, of Yahweh's deliverance of Israel from Egypt."²³

It is important to see justice in the Bible as relational "Justice in the Bible, all agree, is relational--how a thing, act, or person relates to a standard of justice, in this case of God. In biblical religion there is no

order or fate beyond God to which things conform; Yahweh, the Highest, is the standard of justice and those properly related to God become just.”²⁴

'Justice' refers to this harmony between creatures (and especially humans in society) originally intended by God at creation. It also refers to the need for the restoration of justice where this has been broken. Due to our lack of understanding of God's order and our long history of living in ways that depart from it, we require the help of the Holy Spirit to discern the reality of injustice and remedies for it.

God is justice. He cannot be separated from justice because that is who he is. God himself is Justice. His justice cannot be separated away from him. “True social justice flows from the heart of God. When we show compassion and mercy to the poor, we show the world that God cares. This also means that when we are indifferent to the needs of the poor, we communicate to the world that God is indifferent.”²⁵

It is evident that:

“Biblical social justice therefore concerns itself with God's love for people both physically and spiritually, in word and deed, from our souls to our skin. We must define justice according to God's truth revealed in scripture. Our ideas of justice must adjust to God, not the other way around. While there are many reasons to be skeptical of the misuse or overuse of the term “social justice”, cannot escape this truth: God cares for the poor and vulnerable.”²⁶

Justice means that people get what they deserve – as image bearers of God. “To achieve social justice in society, governments might have to do more than just ensure that laws and policies treat individuals in a fair manner. Social justice also concerns the just distribution of goods and services, whether it is between nations or between different

groups and individuals within a society.”²⁷

In Jesus' life, “Particularly intriguing is Jesus' quotation from Isaiah at the beginning of his public ministry that orients this ministry as one focused on “good news for the poor.” This is modeled throughout his life and teaching and continued by the early church in Acts.”²⁸

Like the Old Testament prophets, the New Testament also focuses on Jesus who is sensible to justice and Gospel Proclamation. “Justice is the inextricable context and content of the witness of the New Testament writers concerning Jesus and what God was doing in and by his life, death, and resurrection; and that Jesus, in their narrative, carries forward the prophetic sensibility to injustice—that is, the conviction that the fate of the vulnerable low ones is to be interpreted in terms of justice rather than charity and that their condition is to be given priority in the struggle against injustice.”²⁹

Social Justice and Biblical Justice

Since justice is an attribute of God, “Social justice need not be seen as a code word for a particular political party or politician platform. Even understood synonymously with distributive justice, advocating for or pursuing social justice does not necessarily entail the support of any particular political party or candidates.”³⁰ Most times it is only seen as “distributive justice. The terms are generally understood to be synonymous and interchangeable in both common parlance and the language of international relations.”³¹ Social justice goes beyond distributive justice where it is anticipated things are shared equally. When things are shared or distributed equally, it is not justice.

Social justice is better seen as “dimensions of justice about the life of societies, both in creating and in addressing injustices. It includes the challenge to each individual to maintain and build up the common good of the society, within an open horizon which can extend to a care for the natural world and for future generations. In Christian understanding, God is the ultimate source and guarantor of justice.”³²

As for me biblical justice and social justice should not be differentiated. They are both required and are important in their own contexts. Though it is generally accepted that Social justice has to do with “the way that material resources and social advantages are distributed and made accessible in society. Social justice is manifested when all people have equal access to resources and opportunities, such as health care, employment and education.”³³ If God commanded all people to be stewards of the earth, we can assume he desires all people to have access to the earth's resources.

When there is justice, peace will prevail. Peace and justice go together. “The biblical idea of peace (shalom) is the condition that exists when justice is fully expressed. In early antiquity the philosophers believed that peace and justice were two sides of the same coin. The early Greek philosopher Plato argued in the *Republic* that justice was “peace” or harmony. Justice was expressed when harmonious relationships existed between warring parts of the city.”

In the Ancient Near East (ANE) laws. “the king was to be concerned with the protection of the vulnerable, but the actual legislation gives limited rights to widows and orphans. However, many distinctive in this regard that point to a deeper concern and higher morality than in contemporary ANE codes.”³⁴

Protection and showing justice to the poor are always acknowledged. “Several laws within the ANE clearly have the interests of the poor in view. There are laws concerned with lending money to the poor and sharing produce with the poor. These laws not only aim to encourage provision for the poor but also to curb the growth of wealth, which would result in greater separation of the classes. Lenders were not to charge interest to the poor.”³⁵

Our contemporary society is not different from ANE as far as care for the widows and orphans is concerned. There are many widows and orphans today. In ANE legislation, widows and orphans are

universally mentioned as classes of powerless people in society. Due to the harsh conditions in ancient times, with war, famine, and disease being commonplace, widows and orphans were ubiquitous. Widows could not inherit their deceased husband's property, and orphans could only inherit property or learn a trade if adopted. Some Middle Assyrian laws legislated provisions for a widow and gave her the right to remarry if her husband was taken prisoner in war (and presumed dead). Some Hittite laws legislated a levirate obligation by her dead husband's family, but most widows had to seek employment or attempt to find a new husband (e.g., Ruth) ³⁶.

The Gospel Proclamation

Gospel proclamation begins with Jesus as he cited Isaiah 61:1-2 and quoted in Luke 4:18-19. Jesus presented His ministry of proclamation by beginning from town. He made a presentation in the synagogue: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He has anointed Me to preach the good news to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim freedom to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor” (Luke 4:18-19).

Jesus continued the proclamation of the Gospel throughout different towns. He presented the Kingdom of God. He also commissioned His disciples to do the work of proclamation (Matt. 10:7- 20). “Salvation of humanity depends on the proclamation of the Gospel, that is, on learning about the Gospel and putting what we learn into practice in a full and unimpeded manner.”³⁷

There are other references that talk about the proclamation of the Gospel in relation to justice or social justice. The references have to do with care for the needy and the oppressed within societies. Jesus' teaching is centered on the freedom of the oppressed. He is concerned about social justice not only in His community but globally. This was the reason for commissioning his disciples to take up the global task of Gospel Proclamation. Matthew writes focusing on justice to the

nations 'Here is my servant whom I have chosen, the one I love, in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit upon him, and he will proclaim justice to the nations.' (Matthew 12:18). Matthew still writes of Jesus' concern for the marginalized 'If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.' (Matthew 19:21). Jesus charged the Pharisees of their negligence to justice and mercy, 'Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law – justice, mercy and faithfulness.' (Matthew 23:23).

Jesus illustrates how to care for one's neighbor. Vertical and horizontal relationship is exhibited 'Then the King will say to those on his right, "Come you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me." Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink..." The King will reply, "I tell you the truth, whatever you did for the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.'" (Matthew 25:34-40).

Jesus gave the parable of the Good Samaritan as an endorsement for caring for the neighbor 'But a Samaritan, as he travelled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. "Look after him," he said, "and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you might have." Which of these three do you think was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?' (Luke 10:33-36). This is another instance of caring for the neglected in the society 'Go out quickly into the streets and the alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the

lame.' (Luke 14:21).³⁸

Conclusion

Social justice and gospel proclamation are biblical teachings emphasized in both the Old and New Testament. Old Testament prophets centered on justice and mercy for the downtrodden and foreigners. The prophets emphasized *tsedeqah* and *mishpat*, justice and judgment respectively. In the New Testament, Jesus focused on *dikaioisune* which is justice and righteousness, caring for the needy, justice for the poor and oppressed, and setting the captives free. Jesus assigned his disciples to continue the task of gospel proclamation to the end of nations.

Endnotes

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