

Running head: SOCIAL JUSTICE AND A BIBLICAL FOUNDATION

1

Social Justice Through the Lens of the Cross: A Case for a Biblical Foundation of
Social Work

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Abstract

Social work values social justice, as the profession promotes the well-being of society and the rights each person holds. Although social justice is a core value of social work, it is necessary to address the value's foundation, and questioning the "why" behind social justice calls for a deeper understanding of social work. Using the "Inside-Out" apologetic approach demonstrates how the secular grounding of social work neglects to provide the foundation required to make claims on the necessity of social justice. A Christian foundation, however, offers the grounding needed to support the values and mission of social work, and it is valuable to support a Christian understanding of social work.

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The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) grounds social work upon the six core values of service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, the importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence (NASW, 2017). Although these values further the mission of social work, social workers must assess the foundation for the values, specifically regarding social justice. Questions addressing the reason behind caring for the poor or advocating for human rights explain why the profession of social work needs a solid grounding. To best serve society, the profession of social work needs a foundation that adequately supports its claims. Currently, the secular basis of social work neglects to offer such a foundation, and when addressed critically, the profession of social work quickly loses its structure. Even so, social justice benefits society and individuals; therefore, social work needs a different foundation. It requires a grounding that asserts the necessity of social justice and why people have certain rights; it needs a Christian foundation.

Understanding Inside-Out

To best analyze what secular social justice claims, why its foundation is weak, and how Christianity strengthens social justice, the “Inside-Out” apologetic is the best method to utilize. Inside-Out is a framework that can be used in a variety of situations but is most commonly applied in conversations regarding Christianity and a differing viewpoint. A person using this model seeks to first understand the opposing perspective before offering a case for Christianity.

Concerning the issue of social justice and its foundation, instead of merely representing a Christian understanding of social justice, Inside-Out first aims to comprehend the contrasting framework (Chatraw & Allen, 2018). Inside-Out, then, identifies points where Christianity and social work overlap, thus affirming aspects of social work. Areas of disagreement, however, signify points which the gospel must challenge (Chatraw & Allen, 2018). Showing inconsistencies within secular social work allows for other frameworks, specifically Christianity, to be plausible. These first steps are a part of working “Inside” one’s framework, and approaching discourse in this way allows for humility and honesty to be at the center of conversations, instead of hostility and misunderstanding (Chatraw & Allen, 2018).

Inside-Out, however, continues by working outside one’s framework. The “Outside” stages point to the gospel, as the method first shows places where the opposing viewpoint has borrowed from the Christian narrative (Chatraw & Allen, 2018). Working outside social work’s secular framework shows how Christianity offers a better foundation for social justice and how the gospel strengthens social work. Inside-Out aims to understand a differing worldview, find points to affirm and to challenge, and point to the gospel (Chatraw & Allen, 2018). Utilizing this apologetic method with the profession of social work will show the weaknesses within secular social work and how the gospel ultimately strengthens social justice.

Inside

Understanding What Social Work Values

As one of the six core values of social work, social justice holds significant weight within the profession; in some ways, social justice is the basis on which social work stands (NASW, 2017). The NASW (2017) has written a *Code of Ethics* for the profession and defines key aspects of social justice, and social justice includes the promotion of well-being for individuals and communities (NASW, 2017). Social workers should advocate for equal access and opportunity of employment, resources, and other services people need to meet basic human needs (NASW, 2017). Furthermore, social workers should strive to increase opportunities for individuals, specifically for the poor, oppressed, and marginalized (NASW, 2017). Lastly, social workers must fight against injustice (NASW, 2017). *The Code of Ethics* never clearly defines what social justice is, but broadly, the value includes advocating for human rights, social duty, personal freedom, and self-determination (Hoefler, 2012).

Although the *Code of Ethics* describes social justice in terms of how social workers should promote it, *The Social Work Dictionary* explains what social justice in practice looks like (Barker, 2003). The definition of social justice is the following: “An ideal condition in which all members of a society have the same basic rights, protections, opportunities, obligations, and social benefits” (Barker, 2003, p. 29). This explanation is explicit in its focus on distributive practices as it advocates for equal distribution of resources and opportunities (Hoefler, 2012). Furthermore, these two definitions emphasize the well-being of individuals and allocating various services to those in need. This is how

the profession social work outlines the value of social justice, although social workers may disagree on what these principles specifically look like in practice.

These beliefs about social justice are further rooted in beliefs about human rights. Wolterstorff (2008) explains that human rights are freedoms an individual has not by goodness but simply by being human. Presently, the advocacy of human rights includes descriptions such as the protection of individuals from abuse and oppression (Ignatieff, 2001). Furthermore, human rights advocacy has spread globally, as is seen through the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* by the United Nations General Assembly (Ignatieff, 2001). The spread of these rights, however, does not indicate that all people fighting for human rights believe the same notions about them (Ignatieff, 2001). The United Nation's declaration has a Western view of human rights, as the writing frequently includes words such as "empowerment" and "freedom," which have individualistic connotations (as cited in Ignatieff, 2001, p. 73). As the advancement of human rights is deeply influenced by the Western world, the promotion of human rights and justice by the profession of social work is rooted in Western ideals.

However, when advocating for freedom from oppression, social workers do not coerce clients into a Western view of life, but social work aims to give clients the ability to decide what sort of life they desire to have. This is the value of client self-determination (NASW, 2017). Thus, human rights advocacy supports differing views of human flourishing and understands how culture impacts perspectives (Ignatieff, 2001; Poe, 2012b). Relativity regarding social justice and human rights does not mean the

values are simply cultural, but the secular understanding of social work struggles to provide reasons as to why (Poe, 2012b).

John Rawls (1971), well-known moral philosopher, defines justice as “the first virtue of social institutions” (p. 3). His understanding of justice indicates that a good enjoyed by some does not then permit a lack of freedom for others (Rawls, 1971). Social justice is ultimately about not viewing one individual over another, but it explores the rights and duties within society and allocates them among individuals and institutions, with the goal of enhancing the lives of people (Rawls, 1971). Social justice recognizes the uniqueness of different societies and the impact culture has on the interpretation of justice (Poe, 2012b). With the goal of unity and consistency, social justice develops responsibilities for all members of society (Volf, 1996). Longing for right relationships among individuals and communities, social workers pursue justice (Poe, 2012b).

Affirming Social Work

Affirming social justice. Although there are differing motivations for social justice, significant points of overlap exist between Christianity and social work. The root of social justice is the notion that it is undesired for people to suffer, and social workers should prevent it whenever attainable (Keith-Lucas, 1985). In some way, Christianity functions in a similar way, as it fights back against suffering and is intentional about serving the poor and oppressed (See Deut. 14:28-29; Job 29:12-17). Christians and secular social workers alike can agree they desire to see an end to suffering in the world (Keller, 2016).

Furthermore, when addressing the NASW (2017) *Code of Ethics*, Christianity can affirm the ways in which social workers are to bring about social justice. Social workers advocate for the well-being of society and individuals within society (NASW, 2017), and while Christianity may not completely agree with what social work means when it says “well-being”—though the term is not explicitly defined—Christians desire for flourishing among all aspects of society. Moreover, Christianity can affirm the belief that is it necessary to further opportunities specifically for the poor, oppressed, marginalized, etc. and to ensure access of resources (NASW, 2017; see Is. 10:1-3; Deut. 10:18). Regarding those in need, social justice asks much of individuals and society but so does Christ, as he modeled what it looks like to love those in need (See Lk. 4:16-19, 14:10-15, 18:22; Jn. 14:10-12). Justice is not easy; it demands the sharing of the goods people own and making personal sacrifices for others (Keith-Lucas, 1989).

Affirming human rights. Additionally, human rights are a key component of social justice, and Christians and non-Christians alike affirm the value of the person. As another core value of social work, the NASW (2017) asserts the dignity and worth of the person and thus fights for human rights. Social workers recognize and protect basic human rights, “including the rights to freedom, safety, privacy, an adequate standard of living, healthcare, and education” (Sherr & Jones, 2014, p. 61). Christianity can uphold the importance of human rights as it relates to every person being made in the image of God (Gen. 1:26-17). Moreover, social work argues for human rights because they protect the powerless, and Christians are also called to protect the defenseless. Although the

particulars of human rights are debated, Christians and secular social workers alike support the fundamental importance of rights and justice.

Affirming community responsibility. A critical aspect of social justice is understanding the interdependency among humans. When part of society suffers, all of society is impacted (Keith-Lucas, 1989). Recognizing the need for one another is a key part of social work and the promotion of justice, and Christianity also recognizes how communities need each other. Galatians 6:2 reminds Christians to “bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ” (ESV). Ultimately, social justice advocacy is rooted in love for humanity, and for Christians, this represents a reflection of God’s love for his creation (Keith-Lucas, 1989). As Martin Luther King Jr. once wrote in “Letters from a Birmingham Jail,” “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere” (as cited in Poe, 2012b, p. 158). Christians and social workers alike understand the weight of injustice and are fighting back against it.

Where Social Work Leads: Recognizing Inconsistencies

Although social work and Christianity agree on some concepts regarding justice and human rights, one must consider where social work’s foundation leads. The NASW’s (2017) *Code of Ethics* references the intrinsic value of every individual and the responsibility to combat injustices, but the NASW neglects to provide reasons as to what gives social work the authority to speak on these values and how do they justify the standards (Sherwood, 2012). The Western world is dedicated to justice, but Charles Taylor (1989) rightly asks, “what sources can support our far-reaching moral commitments?” (p. 515). Furthermore, it is a Western misconception to claim everyone

has the same views on human rights and justice, for these values are far from indisputable (Taylor, 1999). Within a single culture, everyone must hold the same views regarding justice for the values to impact society; justice depends on the relationships between individuals (Poe, 2012b). The issue for secular social work is distinguishing what standard should be used to determine social justice and human rights; it is not enough to say these values exist without identifying why (Poe, 2012b).

Without the presence of a moral being, social workers can only say that rights and justice have historically been shown to protect people from abuse and violence (Ignatieff, 2001). This statement, however, is merely rooted in historical evidence, which does not result in moral obligation (Ignatieff, 2001). This is the “is-ought” dilemma (Sherwood, 2012, p. 91). Without a source of authority, “is” does not result in “ought” (Sherwood, 2012). Facts, such as historical evidence, do not simply result in moral obligations (Sherwood, 2012). Human rights are thus built upon the fear of what humanity can do if left unattended, instead of hope for a better way.

Secular social work often tries to establish the necessity of human rights and social justice in the sanctity of human beings (Ignatieff, 2001). However, by denying the existence of a creator, humanity only exists by chance (Sherwood, 2012). If no one created humans, how, then, does humanity have intrinsic value, what gives people these rights, and why should social works advocate for justice? Moreover, focusing on the character of human nature does not support the claim of inherent worth, for people consistently fail, disappoint, and betray (Taylor, 2007). Even when social workers are successful in helping those in need, those same people may be in a similar situation soon

after. While individuals may exhibit goodness in some ways, this is not the same as providing support for intrinsic worth (Ignatieff, 2001). It is difficult to ground human rights without the presence of a transcendent entity.

To make statements about human rights, there must be a deep understanding of human dignity, but without the existence of a moral being, sufficient grounding is impossible (Wolterstorff, 2008). Individuals, however, can certainly believe in the presence of inherent human dignity even when they cannot provide adequate support for this claim (Wolterstorff, 2013). The United Nations' statements about human rights are deeply rooted in the dignity of human beings, even though they assume these rights without explaining their existence (Wolterstorff, 2013). Most secular reasonings for human rights are rooted in human dignity based on human capacity (Wolterstorff, 2013). With human capacity being the foundation, however, people who do not exhibit enough capacity—infants, the elderly, severely disabled individuals, etc.—are therefore undeserving of rights. Human capacity, then, is insufficient grounding; there must be a better way.

Moral judgments and obligations assert objective values, even when reasoning for them is weak (Mackie, 1977). Modern-day thought is deeply embedded with objective moral claims, though the fact that people claim objectivity does not simply validate the existence of human rights (Mackie, 1977). From a secular perspective, there can be no objective moral obligations; people can only describe their *feeling* of justice (Mackie, 1977). The issues, then, arise of whose idea of justice is “right,” and what happens when two people have very strong, yet very different, views of justice (Volf, 1996). The

profession of social work must address if there is any way to assert right and wrong actions based on their current secular foundation. If there is no way to decide between right and wrong actions, society becomes relativistic and the ambitions of social workers become useless.

Without the existence of a moral being, morality quickly becomes subjective, while it aims to be objective (Keller, 2016). Relative morality is unlivable, for as Timothy Keller (2016) writes, “If there is no truth, on what basis can the weak say to the strong that what they are doing is wrong” (p. 202). The profession of social work is, thus, unable to advocate for the oppressed or marginalized; social work loses its impact within a relativistic society. Whatever advantages exist from the lack of a moral being, seeing unwarranted acts of violence outweighs these benefits (Hunter, 2000). Social work needs objective moral claims to function, but without a moral being, the profession must address how to ground their values.

There must be something more than mere cultural perspectives on rights and justice (Sherwood, 2012). Abuse, oppression, and neglect must be morally wrong; this cannot just be the viewpoint of Western social work (Sherwood, 2012). Sherwood (2012) writes, “It may often be hard to believe in God, but I find it even harder to believe in the alternatives, especially when it comes to values” (p. 99). Secular social work has a weak foundation for rights and justice, but it is clear they are necessary (Ignatieff, 2001). It is valuable that social workers are holding onto the dignity and worth of individuals, but social work’s weak foundation should not be overlooked (Sherwood, 2012).

Outside

How Social Work Borrows from Christianity

The profession of social work displays faith, even though it may not acknowledge its beliefs. In many ways, all positions of helping have a religious foundation because serving others is not an instinctual aspect of humanity, and every global religion emphasizes aiding those in need (Keith-Lucas, 1994). Non-religious people can still help others even without a religious foundation, and they sometimes serve more effectively than the religious individuals (Keith-Lucas, 1994). The real question, however, is who has a stronger reasoning for providing the help.

As previously argued, human rights and justice must ultimately be rooted in the idea of a god (Stackhouse, 1998). Before explaining the importance of human rights, one must maintain a theological framework (Stackhouse, 1998). C.S. Lewis, in *The Abolition of Man*, contends that once people, whether religious or nonreligious, shift descriptive reflections into moral obligations they are acting through faith (as cited in Sherwood, 2012). Constructing moral claims based on observations involves "...basic assumptions (or faith) about the nature of the universe and human beings" (Sherwood, 2012, p. 90). Secular social work neglects to address the presence of faith in their claims.

In some ways, social work developed out of the Christian framework. Many social workers believe human rights emerged out of the Enlightenment, but these rights developed through medieval Christendom (Wolterstorff, 2008). Furthermore, the Church's mission concerning justice had a significant impact on how the present-day profession of social work views justice (Poe, 2012b). Often considered the "mother" of

social work, Jane Addams and her work in the Hull-House settlement was rooted in her Christian faith (Schultz, 2015). Because of Addams' dedication to serving through the love of Christ, she founded the profession of social work, and current social workers must not disregard the profession's religious roots (Schultz, 2015).

Moreover, the following biblical ideologies helped establish the foundation of social work (Poe, 2012a). By declaring the intrinsic worth of all individuals, the NASW (2017) asserted the dignity and worth of the person as a core value of the profession, but this ideal is taken from the biblical implication that all people are made in the image of God (Poe, 2012a, Gen. 1:26). Social work maintains that work is an important aspect of human life, and in Genesis, God instructs people to work and be fruitful as he declares the cultural mandate (Poe, 2012a; Gen. 1:28). Likewise, the profession of social work emphasizes that individuals steward their resources, and biblical authors continually remind people that everything one has is a gift from God and should be used wisely (Poe, 2012a; Ps. 24:1-2; Deut. 8:17). Additionally, social work contends the importance of relationships, and the Bible further expresses that humans were made for relationships with others and with God (NASW, 2017; Gen. 2:18; Heb. 10:24-25). Lastly, social workers aim to recognize the strengths within every individual, and in Romans, Paul addresses how people have been given different giftings (Rom. 12:3-8). Although modern-day social workers may argue that the profession's values were created through the Enlightenment, Christian ethics provided the original foundation.

The values on which social work stands are important for individuals and society, but social workers should consider if the profession can support these values without the

basis of religion. Elton Trueblood, a Quaker philosopher addressing human rights, called the present condition a “cutflower” generation, for just as a flower only survives so long after being cut from its roots, the presence of human rights and justice can only survive a short time while rejecting the foundation of these values in God (Sherwood, 2012, p. 88). The profession of social work may be able to argue for rights and justice currently, but these values must ultimately be rooted in God for them to have lasting significance in the world.

Christianity Offers a Stronger Foundation

Oftentimes, secular individuals misunderstand the Christian notion of social justice, as though Christians will always act in loving and just ways simply because they are Christian (Sherwood, 2012). This assumption is a wrong interpretation of what it means to be a Christian and fight for justice; believing in Christ does not negate the presence of sin in one’s life. Instead, the gospel gives individuals a foundation on which to build values, such as social justice and human rights (Sherwood, 2012). It provides a lasting context that will stand the test of time, as it does not waver through cultural phases (Sherwood, 2012). Currently, the NASW’s values of rights and justice are those of the majority within the West, though versions of these values may vary from person to person, but this raises the question regarding what will happen if the majority ceases to believe in human rights. If the Western world no longer declares the importance of rights and justice, these values will not survive.

Grounding social justice and human rights. With a biblical foundation, however, the dignity and worth of a person is rooted in God creating people in the image

of himself (Gen. 1:26). While the profession of social work also asserts the worth of every individual, this belief can be understood as merely a cultural preference, instead of an unchangeable moral truth (Sherwood, 2012). All too often, social work justifies its values on the idea that “everybody knows it,” but this assumption is a fragile foundation in comparison to what the biblical perspective provides (Sherwood, 2012). The Civil Rights Movement revealed that simply because the majority holds to a belief does not make it morally good. In a sermon on July 4, 1965, Martin Luther King Jr. spoke on the issue of segregation and argued that the issue of human rights—which was ignored at the time—was more important than what the majority White culture asserted; “there are no gradations in the image of God” (as cited in Keller, 2016, p. 199). Ascribing the importance of human rights in what the majority believes is a weak foundation.

Values must be rooted in something beyond science or culture (Chatraw & Allen, 2018). There needs to be a sense of what something was created for in order for moral accounts to produce obligation, and the biblical narrative provides this explanation of what humanity was made for (MacIntyre, 1981). The best and simplest framework for asserting moral truths is grounded in looking to the personal God who designed all things and gave the world meaning and purpose (Chatraw & Allen, 2018). People feel a sense of right and wrong because God designed humans with a consciousness of morality (Chatraw & Allen, 2018). As Chatraw and Allen (2018) write, “Our propensity as human beings to evaluate the desires and motives of ourselves and others is both unique to us and universal among us” (p. 171). Knowing humanity can formulate moral judgments should point people to the existence of God (Chatraw & Allen, 2018).

Restoration of relationships. Much of the conversation surrounding social justice is about resource distribution and fairness, but a Christian understanding focuses beyond resources and onto the restoration of relationships (Poe, 2012b). Just principles should aim to develop loving relationships among people, for as individuals embrace the “other,” justice becomes more than fairness (Poe, 2012b). Justice cannot prevail unless people make the conscious decision to embrace others (Volf, 1996). For individuals to agree on what justice holds, people must desire to embrace others and pursue unity, and the gospel provides a framework for why justice requires embrace (Volf, 1996).

Just as God embraces humanity even at its weakest moments, so should individuals unite with one another and fight for restored relationships. Upon reflecting on how God acts, it is evident that love shapes justice, and love requires sacrifice (Volf, 1996). Furthermore, the sacrifices needed to produce justice will not ensue without encountering the immense love of Christ, because the love people must have for one another to produce true justice is unattainable by mankind (Critchley, 2012; Keller, 2016). Simon Critchley (2012) argues that progress towards justice only occurs alongside belief in God and his love. As Jesus instructed during the Last Supper, Christians are to love others as Christ has loved them (Jn. 13:34). Because of the presence of sin in the world, just aspirations easily become unjust, but if people want true justice, they must desire love (Volf, 1996). Having a grasp of the love of God gives people a framework for social justice, its importance, and the obligation to embrace others.

How the Bible addresses social justice. Throughout both the Old and New Testaments, the theme of justice is evident; there are examples of God caring for the

needs of the poor and a command for people to aid those facing adversity. Wolterstorff (2008) states that justice is a “pervasive and inextricable theme” of the Bible (p. 66). If God created all people, then treating every person with dignity and respect honors God (Poe, 2012a). Understanding what God has commanded regarding the care for individuals gives social workers a sense of what social justice should entail.

Defining biblical social justice. Concerning justice in the Bible, two key words embody what Christian social justice must look like: mishpat and tzadeqah (Keller, 2010). These Hebrew words when used together translate as *social justice*, but in order to fully understand what social justice means within the biblical context, it is necessary to address what mishpat and tzadeqah mean individually (Keller, 2010). Mishpat appears in verses such as Proverbs 31:8, Deuteronomy 27:19, and Jeremiah 22:3, and the word stresses action, such as providing people with the rights they deserve (Keller, 2010). Focused on serving others with equity instead of favoritism, mishpat relates to the treatment of the poor, fatherless, immigrant, etc. (Keller, 2010). As what mishpat expresses, Christian social workers should do justice and promote equity for others.

Tzadeqah, on the other hand, is about righteousness within relationships (Keller, 2010). There is a sense of involvement in helping the poor, instead of simply giving people what they need. Tzadeqah entails a dedication to those in poverty and a striving to form relationships with them (Keller, 2010). An embodiment of tzadeqah is seen in Job, as it is written, “I was eyes to the blind and feet to the lame. I was a father to the needy...” (Job 29:12-17, ESV). Commitment to justice and to the poor are significant aspects of tzadeqah.

Together mishpat and tzadeqah create an image of service, love, and devotion. Jeremiah 9:24 writes, "...I am the Lord who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the Lord" (ESV). This is what Christian social justice is about. Although promoting social justice includes resource distribution, there are deeper convictions that call for a commitment to the poor.

Regarding the distribution of resources. Since current conversations surrounding social justice largely concern resource distribution, it is important to address how the Bible speaks to this issue. Throughout the Old Testament, God expected equitable distribution of resources, specifically pertaining to the harvests and leaving some crops in the fields for the poor to glean (Poe, 2012a; Lev. 19:9-10; Ruth 2). This perspective of resource distribution for the poor is different from the modern-day perception of many social workers. The biblical model allows the poor to experience dignity and empowerment as they are responsible for gleaning their food, although the food is still a gift. Individuals who were able to work were presumed to do so, but the laws put in place were set to show compassion (Poe, 2012a). The welfare model often merely provides access to food and other necessities without requiring anything in return. The biblical model, however, cares for the poor through justice, equity, and dignity, while also maintaining the importance of sharing the abundance of what one has (Poe, 2012a).

Regarding the treatment of the poor. What a secular social worker might point out, however, is how this biblical model only seems to account for the poor who are able to work for their needs. There are the poor who are unable to work at all, and Christian social workers must speak to this issue. Deuteronomy 14:28-29 discusses helping those

who cannot provide anything in exchange for food, as it calls those who have abundance to attend to the needs of the poor, stranger, orphan, etc., without asking for anything in return. Furthermore, in Exodus, the Israelites are reminded that just as they were once travelers, they should treat strangers with kindness and hospitality, and in the New Testament, Hebrews addresses generosity towards strangers in a similar manner (Ex. 22:21; Heb. 13:2). In James chapters 2 and 5, the warning for the rich to not neglect the poor or show partiality highlights God's value of the poor and equitable distribution of resources (Jam. 2:1-17, 5:1-6; Poe, 2012a). Moreover, the prophets rebuked those who lacked mercy and justice and encouraged those who walked righteously to continue in their good work (Amos. 4:1-3; Ez. 18:5-9; Zech. 7:8-14; Poe, 2012a). God clearly understands the complexities regarding helping those in need and will avenge against their mistreatment (Ps. 9:8-16, 10:17-18; Keller, 2016; Poe, 2012a). Social workers, now, have a stronger conviction and framework for advocating for the poor once they understand how God values those in need.

Understanding the grand narrative. Looking at the story of the Bible and how it relates to justice today, there are two key considerations. There is the awe of knowing God's goodness through appreciating his creation and the recognition of the grace of God through his redemption (Keller, 2010). Both factors affect how one should approach social work, and the biblical narrative gives social workers a deeper awareness of the importance of justice.

The Bible is a story of justice and mercy (Poe, 2012b). When God created the world, he created man in his image, which gave every person infinite worth and dignity

(Gen. 1:26-27; Keller, 2010). However, the people God created broke their relationship with him, and this rebellion has impacted all aspects of the world (Gen. 3; Poe, 2012b). The effects of this broken relationship are seen through the injustices within the world; glancing at human history delivers countless instances of the brokenness within individuals and the world (Poe, 2012b). However, God sent his son, Jesus, to die on the cross as a perfect atonement for all sin, and Jesus conquered death by rising from the dead on the third day (Jn. 11:25; Matt. 28:5-6). Whoever believes in God and repents from his sin will have eternal life in heaven, for Christ paid the ultimate sacrifice (Jn. 3:16-17). Jesus' life, death, and resurrection created a way for justice to be restored throughout all relationships and the world (Poe, 2012b). The biblical narrative presents a beautiful and perfect story of how God brings forth justice and mercy. Appreciating this story provides a way to understand a framework for justice and its eternal significance.

Who is God? Belief in God provides a solid foundation for asserting the necessity and eternal significance of justice, for a strong understanding of justice is rooted in confidence in God. Christian theologians hold three general claims regarding God and justice: (1) "God is all-knowing," (2) "God is perfectly just," and (3) "God is not a tribal deity"—he transcends culture (Volf, 1996, p. 197). Therefore, what God asserts regarding justice will be just for all the world, regardless of what specific individuals may perceive as justice (Volf, 1996). "If God is the God of all peoples, the justice of God must be the justice for all peoples" (Volf, 1996, p. 197). This divine justice is necessary before peace can ensue (Volf, 1996).

Divine justice requires divine judgment (Keller, 2016). By believing in God's final judgment, Christians have hope that one day there will be peace. This confidence allows Christians to refuse to rely on violence in bringing about peace and gives the reassurance that God will make all things right (Keller, 2016). This image is one of restoration, and social workers can rest in knowing their work is not in vain. The just work that social workers begin here on earth will be brought into fulfillment through God restoring all things after the final judgment. The hope of eternal life is only possible because of God's incredible love, as he sacrificed his son to make a way for people to be forgiven (Chatraw & Allen, 2018). Understanding God's love for humanity spurs on social workers to love and serve those in need.

Who is Jesus? In looking at the life and ministry of Jesus, he showed a continual commitment to the poor and can be a model for present-day social workers. Jesus repeatedly stood beside the downtrodden instead of with the wealthy, and in his eternal kingdom there will be no poor or needy (Wolterstorff, 1983). In Luke 4, Jesus declared he had fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah concerning the proclamation of good news and freedom to the oppressed (Lk. 4:16-21). Jesus embodied a picture of wholeness within communities, and he fought back against unjust leaders and laws to bring about justice and compassion (Poe, 2012b).

Ignoring cultural, ethnic, and socioeconomic differences, Jesus' life was one of inclusion and embrace (Keller, 2016). Sometimes the Christian message appears to lead to exclusion, but when looking at who Jesus was, his life was anything but exclusionary (Keller, 2016). He cared for those who no one wanted to recognize; Jesus saw each

individual as being made in the image of God and deserving of dignity and love (Poe, 2012a; see Matt 25:40). This is who social workers are called to be. Even when it is difficult, social workers are to care for the forgotten, and Christ is the perfect model of what it means to love others.

Necessity of the cross. Looking at who God is, his desire for relationship with humanity, and his commitment to justice, the cross becomes a necessity. By sacrificing his son on the cross, God proclaimed that sin and evil would not be ignored; there must be judgment (Keller, 2016). However, God showed his mercy by bearing the weight of sin on himself and accepted the judgment through his son, Jesus Christ (Keller, 2016). Love shaped justice, and love must continue to shape justice today (Volf, 1996).

God conquered evil not by neglecting to recognize it but by enduring the penalty himself (Stott, 1986). Humanity can only be redeemed through the cross, and Christ's sacrifice shows how both God's mercy and justice were satisfied (Stott, 1986). This framework is the model for how social work should be done today; it must encompass both mercy and justice. However, by understanding the cross, God shows that he is the only one who can bring about true and ultimate justice (Keller, 2016). Christian social workers cannot bring about some utopian paradise, but understanding the weight of Christ's sacrifice gives meaning to suffering and a hope that one day justice will be fully restored (Keller, 2016; Chatraw & Allen, 2018).

There is eternal significance in humanity's work towards peace and justice, and even when fighting against injustice is difficult, one can have hope that God will ultimately avenge the evil in the world (Chatraw & Allen, 2018). Having an

understanding of the cross and God's ultimate judgment gives social workers a drive to keep fighting, a sense that their work is significant, and a hope that God will bring about justice. Furthermore, recognizing the weight of the cross means social workers must neither ignore injustice nor merely punish it; social work must be filled with both mercy and justice (Stott, 1986).

Understanding the biblical narrative explains why people have a sense of right and wrong; there is a God who has set moral law in place that exists outside individual and cultural scales of justice (Chatraw & Allen, 2018). People experience a desire to pursue justice in the world because God has placed a longing for peace in the hearts of individuals (Chatraw & Allen, 2018). Pursuing justice and peace in the world is a way in which humanity displays God's nature, and advocating for human rights and social justice points to God and his desire for the world (Chatraw & Allen, 2018). The biblical narrative shows a God who is a deliverer, a redeemer, and one who cares deeply about justice (Wolterstorff, 2013). Understanding the cross provides hope for the Christian: there is hope for deliverance from injustice within this world and hope for a restored world which is freed from all evilness forever (Wolterstorff, 2013). To have a world of true justice, it must be a world of freedom and love, and while this is not possible in the present day, God's transcendent justice will bring about such a world (Volf, 1996).

Challenges for Christianity. Although the biblical narrative offers a strong foundation for understanding justice, there are challenges for Christianity. First, the Christian tradition is far from perfect regarding justice and human rights (Poe, 2012b). Christians have been involved in significant acts of injustice such as justifying slavery for

religious purposes, segregation within churches, etc., and this history must be addressed. Furthermore, even though the church has had a substantial role in helping the poor, they have not always treated the poor with compassion and justice (Poe, 2012a). How, then, can Christianity say their God fights for justice when they, themselves, have a history of injustice? Is Christianity a hypocritical religion?

While Christians have an objective standard to assess justice, they do not have the ability of achieving such justice, for all people are broken and sinful (Poe, 2012b). Furthermore, Christians disagree on what the *nature* of justice is because their understanding is limited and influenced by culture and tradition (Volf, 1996). God's understanding of justice, however, is perfect and true; thus, there is a distinction between the Christian's idea of God's justice and what God's justice actually is (Volf, 1996).

Christians, then, may agree on some values such as justice and human rights, but how these values are put into practice will vary (Sherwood, 2012). Christian stances may not always differ from what the majority culture believes, nor should one assume that a Christian's perspective is always biblical. Christians should bind together with others as they fight for common goals (Sherwood, 2012). All in all, a Christian understanding, specifically regarding social justice, should be approached with humility, as they do not hold the whole picture as God does (Sherwood, 2012).

Furthermore, Christians do not need complete control of a social justice system for social justice to be significant. Christian and secular social workers should work together in advocating and intervening for the needs of their clients. Although Christians may have a deeper foundation for why they do what they do, secular social workers

continue to positively impact the lives of many, and their work should not be diminished. Instead of having “Christian” social work and “secular” social work, people from all different backgrounds and viewpoints should bind together in the fight for social justice.

Christian social justice. Christian social justice and social work offers hope (Wolterstorff, 2013). This hope is not merely a desire for injustice to end, but it is looking towards the future and seeing a picture of a world completing vindicated of evil (Wolterstorff, 2013). This hope shapes how Christian social workers fight for the poor, and understanding that each person is created in the image of God gives social workers a stronger motivation for serving with love and compassion. In the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John Calvin writes, “We are not to consider what men deserve of themselves but to look upon the image of God in all men, to which we owe all honor and love” (Wolterstorff, 1983, p. 78). An act of injustice against another person is a grievance against God (Wolterstorff, 1983). When Christians view others as being children of God there is a stronger foundation for justice—a foundation defined by love and embrace (Volf, 1996). God has created humanity for community with one another and with God; thus, justice should be formed through community (Volf, 1996, see Rev. 21:3-5).

Understanding shalom. Social work through the lens of the cross also gives deeper hope for the hurting. Christ endured pain and suffering, but Christ’s death and resurrection defeated evil and death (Volf, 1996). True justice will bring about shalom, and shalom will arise when all relationships are filled with peace (Wolterstorff, 1983, see Is. 11:6-8). Shalom is what is to come when God brings about ultimate justice in the world; shalom requires justice (Wolterstorff, 1983). This peace is more than the absence

of violence, however, for a country may be at peace with other nations while still experiencing deep poverty (Wolterstorff, 1983). Living in shalom means that relationships with God, others, and the world are made right; there will be a delight in serving God and in being in community with others (Wolterstorff, 1983).

Shalom involves right relationships, and although some aspects of our current world are ethical and just, all injustice must be vanquished before shalom is brought to fulfillment (Wolterstorff, 1983). Thus, Christ helped bring about shalom by dying on the cross and defeating sin and death (Wolterstorff, 1983). However, individuals can also partake in bringing about shalom as people strive for justice and the restoration of relationships: “Shalom is both God’s cause in the world and our human calling” (Wolterstorff, 1983, p. 72). Although God is the one who will ultimately bring about the gift of shalom, Christians are called to struggle and fight for shalom, instead of simply waiting for God to perfect it (Wolterstorff, 1983, see Is. 58:6-7).

This work towards shalom is the aim of Christian social work. Christians must fight back against the injustices within the world and care for the poor (Poe, 2012b) Even the seemingly small steps towards peace and justice have eternal significance, for they help bring about shalom. Knowing what is to come, Christian social workers have a stronger conviction for caring for those in need; their work is not in vain.

Conclusion

When looking at what Christianity and secular social work fight for, there are clear areas of agreement. Both assert the importance of social justice and the value of human rights. What grounds these rights, however, is a point of divergence between the

two viewpoints. In analyzing its foundation, secular the profession of social work neglects to provide a moral obligation for justice and rights, as it claims all people have dignity and worth without providing a strong reason as to why. Secular social work's arguments, although having good intentions, are fragile as they depend on cultural arguments which change through time; these arguments fail to possess moral obligation and are refuted easily. The values of social justice and human right are good for individuals and society, but there must be a better way to ground these values.

Christianity upholds the values of justice and rights while also providing a solid foundation for why they matter. As God created all people in his image, every person is given dignity and respect; therefore, individuals have rights. Likewise, God commands Christians to fight for the poor and the oppressed because he loves every person. Moreover, God values justice, so much so, that he was willing to sacrifice his son to pay the price of humanity's sin, in order that anyone who believes in God can spend eternity with him. This is God's commitment to justice and to humanity as he did not ignore evil but confronted and overcame it. God will one day have a final judgment and rid the world of all evilness, and he will bring about a world of peace in all relationships—shalom.

An understanding of the biblical narrative changes things for social workers. Christian social workers experience a stronger conviction for helping those in need; every person is a child of God. As Christian social workers reflect upon what God has done through Christ and what he will do in the future, there is eternal value in serving the poor and oppressed. Social work matters within a Christian framework in a way in which the secular profession of social work fails to experience. Secular and Christian social work

may look similar in practice, but there is a richer meaning behind why Christian social workers do what they do. There a gratitude of what God has done and is doing here on earth. The fight for biblical social justice must continue in this world as we long for the perfected community of shalom.

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