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## Biblical Foundations of Modern Social Work Values and Practice Competencies

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Biblical Foundations of Modern Social Work Values and Practice Competencies

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### **Abstract**

Modern social work values and practice competencies establish the foundation from which social work educators teach future practitioners much needed knowledge and skills for competent practice. The profession's two major organizations provide the platform upon which this paper was crafted. The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) provides the profession's Code of Ethics, which presents the values and ethical principles guiding social work practice; the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) provides the competency-based framework for social work education. Through the ages, the Bible has presented guidelines regarding: working with the poor and other vulnerable populations in their social context, addressing issues related to the inherent worth of human beings as created in God's image, and teaching individuals about the value of knowledge and wisdom that comes from studying the Holy Scriptures. These same values and principles inform today's social work practitioners and educators through promoting an understanding of, and value for, human life, dignity, and the individual experience in each complex social context. The objective of this paper is to provide an overview of how social work values and graduate practice competencies, even though presented in a secular context in their original sources, clearly align with timeless biblical principles.

### **Introduction**

From its inception, the profession of social work has been closely intertwined with the principles of faith and spirituality. The first “official” social work programs were church-based settlement houses and charity organization societies that translated the Judeo-Christian faith into action. These movements grew out of the charity work of devoted church members concerned with the wellbeing of the widows, orphans, and the poor in their parishes (Harris, 2008; Neagoe, 2011; Sherr & Straugham, 2005). In fact, by the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, over 100 cities around North America had both active charity organization societies and settlement houses. These movements provided material resources to the poor as well as engaged in “friendly visits”, which are considered the precursors to home visits of the modern social work profession (Scales, & Kelly, 2012). Such action on the part of settlement houses and charity societies is in line with the biblical teachings found in the books of Isaiah and James that speak of bringing good news to the poor, binding up those who are emotionally hurting, and assisting the marginalized in their suffering (Isaiah 61:1; James 1:27, NIV).

However, during the early and mid- 20<sup>th</sup> century, the “professionalization [of the social work movement] led to the gradual replacement of religious values with scientific rationalism as the guiding source of social work knowledge and skills” (Derezotes, 2009, p.73). Additionally, during much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the profession struggled with a tension between the new secularization of the discipline and its religious roots, which emphasized the making of disciples as the primary, and sometimes sole purpose of reaching out to others. There was concern that the provision of social services would be a vehicle through which providers would focus on proselytizing their religious convictions, making the help offered contingent on people’s willingness to join a specific religious denomination instead of providing unbiased and inclusive

services to all people in need (Scales, & Kelly, 2012). This practice was also contradictory to Jesus' custom to unconditionally cure hurting people, exemplified through the healing of the daughter of a Canaanite woman who was not part of the mainstream Jewish population (Matthew 15, 21-28). Each of these concerns eventually led to a version of social work that, though effective in its own right, missed many opportunities for crucial collaboration with religious entities towards ends that would have contributed in a more holistic fashion to the needs of society (Derezotes, 2009; Sherr & Straughan, 2005). As a result, in the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, faith-based communities that, for several decades now, had been relegated to the sidelines of major social interventions, began shifting their focus from the domestic arena to the global growth of the humanitarian movement, developing successful North American-based international charities and non-governmental organizations (Ferris, 2011).

In addition, there were several long-lasting results of this movement within the social service field itself. First of all, the profession of social work shifted from a community-based approach towards a more systematic, clinical view of practice and began to focus more on interventions geared towards the individual's mental health, such as psychotherapy. Though instrumental in many ways, such practice lost view of the larger prevention efforts and systemic changes needed at the community level (Specht & Courtney, 1995). Additionally, this progressive change led the profession to forget its roots in Christian volunteerism, which resulted in the diminishment of this valuable resource of human capital within the profession (Sherr & Straughan, 2005).

Conversely, due to a changing economic environment and a societal return to more conservative values following the 1960s and 1970s, the last part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century have seen a reappearance of the concept of spiritual values

becoming a conceptual bridge between “scientific rationalism” and the diverse world religions. This transition is demonstrated by the growing body of professional literature on spirituality and social work over the last three decades (Derezotes, 2009; Garland & Yancey, 2014; Hagan & Scales, 2002). As the modern religious perspective is also consistent with professional social work values, such as the importance of human rights and dignity, equality, compassion, temperance, and service, it follows that a strong connection between these two conceptualizations of reality would serve to provide a more holistic platform for service to clients, without regard to their religious affiliation or spiritual preferences (Derezotes, 2009).

In seeking to further analyze the original holistic care approach provided by the profession at its inception, in this paper the authors return to the foundations of the early social work movement and the precepts of the Judeo-Christian faith as outlined in the Bible and link them to the most current professional and educational standards. The authors focus on the graduate social work curriculum, as this is the place where sustainable solutions to holistic professional practice become a reality.

### **Biblical Framework**

With a long history deeply rooted in biblical values, social work as a profession seeks to promote social change, to assist in personal, family and community problem solving, and to empower people to enhance their well-being (IFSW, 2014). This definition by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) aligns with God’s word to the Israelites given through the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 58:6-7, NKJV), where the Lord admonishes His people: “Is not this the fast that I choose: to lose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, (...)?”

Responding to the biblical mandate, social workers today are found in a variety of settings, involved at different levels of society, using their skills and knowledge to respond to human needs: from working directly with individuals and families, to initiating change in organizations; from prevention program interventions to influencing social policy; from fundraising to grant-writing, social workers address personal and social problems at multiple levels (Barker, 2013). While it is true that in many aspects social work as a profession may be perceived to be in conflict with biblical principles, upon a close revision of the core mandates and guiding principles of both social work practice and social work education, it is clear that there is a strong alignment reminiscent of the deeply religious roots of the profession.

### **Biblical Foundations for Social Work Practice**

Guiding the professional decision-making in social work, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics provides the foundation for ethical social work practice. Since its first formal adoption in 1960, the NASW Code of Ethics has experienced several revisions that sought to address the current issues and social work practice needs of the time (Reamer, 1998). The Code of Ethics as it stands today begins with a definition of the core values that guide the profession, and includes the following values: service, social justice, the importance of human relationships, the dignity and worth of the person, integrity, and competency. IFSW, with a broader, internationally focused mission has added a seventh value to the list: human rights.

The current Code of Ethics was ratified in 1996, and was revised in 2008 as a response to the emerging social needs and current policy concerns, addressing six areas of practice responsibilities: (1) responsibilities to clients, (2) responsibilities to colleagues, (3) responsibilities in practice settings, (4) responsibilities as professionals, (5) responsibilities to the

social work profession, and last, but not least, (6) responsibilities to the broader society. These areas of practice “responsibilities” contain prescriptive rules that govern professional conduct such as maintaining confidentiality, avoiding conflict of interest and dual relationships; thus, representing the moral guide that drives social work practice. Within the biblical context, such rules of conduct and decision-making would be similar to the principles divinely mandated in the Ten Commandments, the Sermon on the Mount, or the parable of the Good Samaritan.

Specifically, these principles could be summarized as honoring God, being honest in all relationships, keeping promises made, and treating others with dignity. Throughout the Sacred Scriptures, the golden thread that links humanity to the divine is God’s immeasurable love for His children, manifested through His care for their basic needs, such as food and shelter: when He provided special catering services as well as protection from the natural elements to the Israelites for 40 years in a desert environment. God also cared for their social issues, such as how to treat the homeless, the strangers, or the poor in the community; He even made special provisions for those fleeing because of having committed unpremeditated crimes by establishing cities of refuge (Numbers 35:11).

From a social work perspective, social workers are professionally mandated “to help people in need and to address social problems”, with *service* being the first value noted in the Code (NASW, 2008). As Christians, the Bible calls us numerous times to serve one another following Jesus’ mission of service evidenced in Matthew 20: 26-28, to help out those who are “hungry”, “thirsty”, or imprisoned (Matthew 25:31-45), to help the wounded, and plan for their journey to health, as the Good Samaritan has done (Luke 10:25-37). From a social work perspective, *social justice*, the second professional value, defined as a deep commitment to alleviate the needs of the poor and vulnerable populations and assist in providing an environment



where these populations can reach their full potential (Donaldson & Mayer, 2014), also has strong roots in the biblical message. Throughout the exile years experienced by the Israelites, God repeatedly sent a clear message to His children through both major and minor prophets: God's people should be concerned with "what is just and right", to "act justly and love mercy", and "to lose the chains of injustice, (...) and set the oppressed free" (Isaiah 58:6; Jeremiah 22:3; Micah 6:7-9).

In addition to addressing social issues from a macro perspective, in His great wisdom, God also provided guidance for human relationship and interactions. Social workers are called to "recognize the *central importance of human relationships*" and "to *respect the inherent dignity and worth of the person*" (NASW, 2008). The Gospels of Matthew (22:37-39) and Mark (12:31) stress the importance of treating one another with love. In fact, not only is the second great commandment to love the neighbor as one would love his or her own self, but in Luke 6:21 the imperative transcends the principle of maintaining a good relationship with friends and cordial neighbors, but also stresses loving enemies and doing good to those who seek to do harm. Why would God stress such concerns? Isaiah 49:16 provides the loving image of a Creator who is deeply concerned with the dignity and worth of the person He created to the point that each one has been "engraved in the palms of [His] hands". Jesus reiterated this message in Matthew 10:31 when He tells His disciples that they are "worth more than many sparrows"; and the apostle Paul also brings a new emphasis to this issue when he writes to the Romans to "be devoted to one another", and to "accept one another, just as Christ accepted you" (Romans 12:9-13; 15:7).

The last two values presented in the Code of Ethics are *integrity* and *competence*, which are defined as behaving in a "trustworthy manner" within a professional "area of competence". Both the Old and the New Testaments call Christians to be holy and above reproach (Ephesians

1:4; 1 Peter 1: 14-16; 1 Thessalonians 4:7), and to behave with integrity as this is pleasing to the Lord (1 Chronicles 29:17). Moreover, the Lord Himself creates opportunities to increase competence by trusting Him, and by seeking competence from His Word (2 Corinthians 3:5-6; Proverbs 3:5-6). The IFSW added a seventh guiding value, addressing an issue that impacts professionals at the global level: upholding *human rights*. Throughout history, the issue of human rights has been of great concern and alternately, of great interest. And yet, the Bible iterates that all human beings, regardless of gender, social or citizenship status, were created in the image of God giving them inherent value and dignity, and that no one is above another (Genesis 1:27; Exodus 22:21; Galatians 3:28; James 2:1-4; Leviticus 19:33-34). Additionally, Proverbs 31: 8-9 suggests that individuals who have the means, such as the novice King Lemuel, should have an obligation to advocate for those who “cannot speak for themselves” and “for the rights of the destitute”.

With a clear alignment between the ethical principles that underscore social work practice and the biblical principles that inform the Christian worldview, it is easy to understand the reason for the existence of another organization supporting Christian practitioners in sharing faith in their practice, the North American Association of Christians in Social Work (NACSW). Established in 1950, with a long tradition of providing support to their Christian members across various social work practice settings in the United States and Canada, NACSW has been the most prominent advocate for the integration of personal faith in social work service. NACSW members have access to different resources for practice, ethical decision-making, and research, such as seminars, podcasts, and peer-reviewed literature on topics of interest to the integration of the Christian faith in the field, and practical applications of biblical principles in the workplace (NACSW, 2008). This organization serves as a strong resource and voice for social workers

seeking to share their faith in environments where clients can be receptive to the healing power of the Holy Spirit.

### **Biblical Foundations for Social Work Education**

While the NASW Code of Ethics guides social work practice, social work education is generally driven by the accreditation standards presented by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) through their Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS). Founded in 1952, CSWE is the sole accrediting body for all programs of social work in the United States, as recognized by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation, with the mission to “ensure and enhance the quality of social work education for a professional practice” (CSWE, 2015). Whereas the purpose of the profession is to promote individual and community wellbeing, CSWE outlines ten areas of professional competence where future practitioners must demonstrate knowledge and skills throughout their educational journey. These competencies address practice areas that span from individuals to families, groups, organizations and communities. Each competency is explained and assessed through a minimum of two practice behaviors each, creating a prescription for practice knowledge and skills that each social work program in the United States must fulfill.

The first competency addresses what it means to be a professional social worker, addressing issues such as advocacy on behalf of clients, professional self-improvement and lifelong learning, professionalism in dress, behavior, and communication, segueing into a strong emphasis on ethical practice evidenced in the second competency (CSWE, 2012b). These introductory competencies lay the foundation for social work education, and indirectly for practice relating to the principles outlined in the social work Code of Ethics. From a biblical perspective, Paul’s first letter to Timothy highly underscores the importance of professional

behavior in practice, as well as the foundation of knowledge and learning for young professionals. This passage of Scripture clearly outlines the behavior that young Timothy should show in his mission field, such as having a close relationship with the Lord and following the guiding teachings of Paul as a mentor (1 Timothy 4:12-15), behaving in a trustworthy manner and being above reproach in his relationship with the people around him (1 Timothy 4:9; 5:1-2), and following God's commandments in his practice (1 Timothy 4:6-8). The first two Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) as mandated by CSWE are in high alignment with strong biblical principles, which can be summarized as: behaving in a professional manner and following ethical, moral principles in all aspects of work and relationships.

The third educational standard outlining the competency thresholds for social work education encourages students and practitioners to consider critical thinking as a foundation for their day-to-day practice and professional decisions (CSWE, 2012b). Critical thinking encourages individuals to consider multiple aspects of a story or an event, as well as the available evidence, before making judgments or decisions. Similarly, after giving the command to leave Horeb, God provides guidelines for the judges of the Israelite congregation. In Deuteronomy 1:16-17, the Lord mandates judges to hear every party fairly and give a proper and fair judgment indifferent of whether the parties were part of the people of Israel or were "aliens". Going back to Paul's letters to Timothy as well as the book of James, the biblical text suggests that the ability for critical thinking comes from the study of the Holy Scriptures. Proverbs 1:7 and 9:10 state that knowledge comes from the "fear of the Lord", that the Word of God is the truth (John 17:17), and that knowledge of the Scriptures will give wisdom (Psalm 111:10; 2 Timothy 3:15). In addition, the ability to acquire wisdom is the outcome of interacting with, and listening to righteous mentors who do good deeds with humility that comes from Scripture-based

wisdom, which in turn is based on the principles of God's Law (James 3:13-18). Solomon also states that true wisdom evidencing critical thinking is based on a personal availability to listen to wise counsel (Proverbs 15:22), and from a relationship with God through the reading and application of His instructions. Therefore, the idea of critical thinking as the basis for good judgment (CSWE Competency 3) has been clearly shown throughout the biblical history as desirable and approved in the eyes of the Lord.

The fourth and fifth competencies address the concepts of diversity and difference, advancing of human rights and social and economic justice in life's context (CSWE, 2012b). Social workers are encouraged to seek to understand how elements of diversity and difference, such as gender, ethnicity, disability, socioeconomic class, poverty, oppression, and power can create a context for the individual and collective, societal life experience (CSWE, 2012b).. Both the Old and the New Testaments highlight the struggles of those living in poverty, and give voice to those oppressed; the story of the widow at Zerephath and her son who were almost dying of hunger in the story of Elijah (1 Kings 17:7-24), the account of Ruth and Naomi's return to Naomi's homeland given in the book of Ruth, or the story of the faithful widow who brought her last coins to the Temple despite the potential that she would become destitute and thus at the mercy of potential oppressors (Mark 12:41-44), they all tell the story of how within the context of cultural structures and societal systems at the time, marital status and gender created a context of poverty and potential exploitation. That was the reason why God commanded His people to care for the widows, the orphans, the poor, and the strangers in their midst: Deuteronomy 14:29 states that these individuals were to find food at the Temple, eating with the Levites; Deuteronomy 27:19 states that these categories of oppressed people should be judged fairly; Isaiah 1:16-17 further encourages advocacy on behalf of the oppressed, the orphans and the

widows of Israel; and Jeremiah 22:3 reaffirms the idea of “do what is just and right. Rescue from the hand of the oppressor the one who has been robbed. Do no wrong or violence to the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow, and do not shed innocent blood in this place”. God showed concern for the oppressed, the poor, and the exploited throughout the story of redemption; the same mandate is also given to social work students and professionals through the fourth and fifth competencies that discuss diversity, human rights and socio-economic justice.

The concepts of research and evidenced-based practice are the focus of the sixth competency (CSWE, 2012b). Drawing on the ideas presented regarding critical thinking, engaging in research practice denotes a thirst for knowledge, both for professional reasons and for sharing it with others. From a professional standpoint, social workers are encouraged to learn from their forerunners’ experiences and observations. God created this thirst for knowledge and understanding from the beginning of creation by appointing Adam to name the animals, and by spending precious time teaching the first couple valuable knowledge and skills (Genesis 2:9). In His immense wisdom, God created an environment of learning and healthy curiosity while Adam and Eve were still in His direct presence. Since then, people have strived to seek knowledge to improve their life, their circumstances, technology, etc. This same thirst for knowledge is expressed by Solomon in different instances: first, in the context of his coronation as king of Israel, Solomon asks for wisdom from God so that he can lead the people in fear of the Lord (2 Chronicles 1:10); second, the same wise king states that “the discerning heart seeks knowledge, but the mouth of the fool feeds on folly” (Proverbs 15:14). Also through Solomon’s writings, God encourages His people to “apply the heart to instruction and the ears to words of knowledge” (Proverbs 23:12) as well as to share knowledge (Proverbs 15:7). Throughout history, God encouraged His people to seek knowledge and to apply it in their day-to-day work and life.

Since seeking knowledge and acquiring wisdom is encouraged throughout both the Scripture and social work education, CSWE also adds that students must learn and apply knowledge of human behavior and the social environment “across the life course” (CSWE, 2012b). The Bible also recognizes the importance of human development and the life span; when the apostle Paul discusses the role of and expression of love, he mentions the importance of human development in that context: “When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me” implying both a biological, progressive growth and developmentally appropriate activities (1 Corinthians 13:11). The Bible also mentions that Samuel fulfilled tasks appropriate to his age while at the Temple (1 Samuel 2:18), while he grew in “stature”, maturing biologically, and “in favor with the Lord and with men” in his relationships, as well as maturing spiritually and growing in knowledge. Similarly, Jesus’ spiritual and intellectual development was recorded in Luke 2:40, culminating with the recording of His three-day discussion with intellectuals present at the Temple. Understanding the stages of development and their appropriate application across the lifespan is therefore important for both the social work practitioner and the Bible student (2 Peter 3:18).

Engaging in policy practice to advance social and economic wellbeing, as well as the understanding of the context of practice, are the next two competencies as presented by CSWE (CSWE, 2012b; Miley, O’Melia & DuBois, 2013). Biblical evidence supports the idea that God is concerned with the rights of the poor and the needy. There are detailed instructions given in Deuteronomy regarding: the harvest and provisions for the poor (Deuteronomy 24:19-22), the availability of food at the Temple to share with aliens in the land, as well as with the widows and the orphans (Deuteronomy 14: 28-29), the complete forgiveness of debt every seven years

(Deuteronomy 15:1-2, 7-11); in addition to specific rules and provisions made for no-interest lending for those in need in the community (Exodus. 22:25). In the context of God's loving care for the welfare of His children, He warned of the downfalls of unjust behavior and denounced the oppressors, while providing the 'policies' of the time to address the social and economic justice for all, specially emphasizing those disempowered, poor or oppressed (Isaiah 10:1-2; 58:6-10; Proverbs 22:22; 31: 8-9; Psalms 146:6-7). In the times of the major and minor prophets in Israel, even when rebuking specific actions, God always provided the context that shaped the oppressive behaviors and practices, as well as His plan for remediation and care for the welfare of the people (Amos 2:6-8; Isaiah 1: 21-28).

God's constant care for the poor and the downtrodden was many times shown through the actions of specially chosen people; an example can be found in revisiting the story of the widow of Zerephath and noting how God used Elijah to create the context in which to care for her and her son's immediate needs through times of trouble for God's people (1 Kings 17:7-24); God intervened and changed the widow and her son's history. Social workers are also called to intervene at multiple levels, from individuals to families, from groups to organizations and communities through the 10<sup>th</sup> competency: "Engage, assess, intervene, and evaluate with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities" (CSWE, 2012b, p.6). Social workers believe that any intervention follows a prescribed process that begins with engagement and assessment, and is concluded with the intervention itself, followed by an evaluation. The story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman provides an excellent example of how this competency also strongly aligned with the biblical foundation (John 4:1-42).

At the beginning of the story, the case is contextualized to help the reader understand all aspects of the teaching moment: Jesus is tired as He is passing near Sychar, a Samaritan town,



and decides to rest near a well. When a townswoman approaches the well, Jesus engages her by asking for some water, and a conversation follows that transcends the social barriers between genders and ancestry. When Jesus began the true assessment of the woman's needs, He offers her what she needs most: the living, cleansing, transforming water. He then creates an intervention leading the conversation to a deeper understanding of the spiritual and material issues that were of concern for this unnamed woman. However, the story does not end here; after the woman shared her experience with the townspeople, the Bible records that "many of the Samaritans from that town believed in Him because of the woman's testimony", thus highlighting the findings of the evaluation of Jesus' intervention, not only at the individual level in the life of the woman, but at the community level as well (John 4:39).

As human beings created in God's perfect image, the human heart thirsts for knowledge and for wisdom, and cries out "teach me knowledge and good judgment" (Psalm 119:66). It is of paramount importance that social work education, taught in a faith-based environment, be aligned with the biblical principles it represents so that true knowledge may increase both for competent social work practice and for eternal life.

### **Conclusion**

From the beginning through the end of the Bible, God has shown concern for the poor, the disempowered, and the helpless, with the ultimate goal of salvation in mind. The New Testament brings to the forefront of consciousness the model set by Jesus and the way He related to the human need. Beginning with His strong relationship with His disciples through teaching and mentoring, healing the sick, and tending to the physical and emotional needs of hurting people, Jesus revealed Himself as the highest Model of what social workers should be, coining the values of today's social work profession. His "Social Gospel" was thoughtfully designed as a

pre-requisite and co-requisite of fulfilling the Great Commission. In the inspired book “Ministry of Healing”, Ellen White clearly describes Jesus’ work as a progression:

Christ's method alone will give true success in reaching the people. The Savior mingled with men as one who desired their good. He showed His sympathy for them, ministered to their needs, and won their confidence. Then He bade them, ‘Follow Me.’ (White, 1905, p.143).

Nevertheless, Jesus’ ministry goals were expressed in Luke 4:18 (NKJV),

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, (...).

Our ministry, as Seventh-day Adventist social work educators, is to teach students, through the social work curriculum, how to walk in the footsteps of Jesus by using His holistic approach: through “the work of restoration: physical, mental, and spiritual” (White, 1905, p. 143).

When educating future leaders in the social work profession, it is of paramount importance to unlock an understanding of the individual as a multifaceted human being, with diverse needs, which includes faith, the spiritual dimension. It is also crucial to instill in the student an understanding of how and why social work grew out of biblical teachings, and how, as future practitioners, they can use these biblical principles as a foundation on which to build their own compassionate and competent social work practice, while fulfilling the God-given mandate reflected in the Great Commission (Matthew 28, 19-20).

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