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What is Social Justice?: A Personal Manifesto

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Personal Manifesto
By: Logan Turner

What is social justice? In a very broad sense, social justice is an active response attempting to resolve a problem in the world concerning an array of things from human rights, animal advocacy, environmental concerns, etc. It is difficult to nail down a concrete definition for the action and activity of social justice, because it covers such a wide range of topics, beliefs, and ideas. The idea of justice itself is something that can be broken down and picked apart, which in turn affects the way one views social justice as a whole. I believe that justice is something that is engrained in people because we are bearers of the image of God. Thus, we, as believers, are representations of God's nature and character on Earth. So, my idea and understanding of social justice is rooted in the truth of Scripture; God who is the perfect and ultimate judge has given to his children passions and gifts, which aid in making a just change in the world for the good of society on a small or large scale. In the end, God will bring justice and restore peace on, but until he returns, we are his hands and feet and advocates for change and justice on Earth.

So, social justice is not defined in a specific issue or type of advocacy, but rather it is a motivation. Each person who is seeking to bring justice has a motivation, a passion. That passion could be based simply on a natural sensitivity or inclination to a specific issue or due to a past experience. I would argue that all of these passions are based on the nature that God has endowed to every human from the beginning of creation. Now, I recognize that everyone who is working towards social justice in array of issues is not a believer in Christ. This does inflict a distinction because only believers are temples of the Holy Spirit, who serves to guide and transform people into the image of God. So, a

believers' motivation to bring justice in any capacity in this world is based upon the nature of a perfectly loving and just God, who they are representatives of.

If this is true, where does this leave nonbelievers who are active participants in and advocates of social justice? We see countless examples of people who are not Christians sacrificing time, energy, and resources to make a difference in the world. Advocacy and philanthropy are even becoming a “trendy” activity to participate in in order to feel good about yourself and make yourself look caring and interested in the world to others. Being involved in social justice can even be a means to an end, as we see examples of in Alana Semuels article, “The Problem With Modern Philanthropy.” So, we see that there are many motivations behind why people do social justice outside of belief in Jesus. However, even if someone does not believe in Christ as their savior, each individual person was created by God, the one perfect, good, and just God. Therefore, despite beliefs, each person has been created with gifts, talents, and passions, and the way in which they use them is based upon where they find their purpose and in life. This translates into people who are advocates of social justice. Because of the way they were created and their experiences, they are motivated to participate in social justice in whatever capacity that matches their passions and goals, despite their specific beliefs in God.

So, why is there such a need for social justice? First, if anyone looks at the world and confidently says that there is no need for justice, they are living in an “ignorance is bliss” world that is not the reality. Turning on the news for five minutes is enough to inform us that our world is broken and unjust and in need people who are will to stand up and fight for change. But, the need for justice is not a new necessity, but rather something

that has been engrained into our world since the beginning. Injustice has been a part of our world, since the Fall of man. In Genesis 3 Eve ate the fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, which God forbade her and Adam to do, the first injustice was committed, spiraling the world into broken state of injustice moving forward. The Earth itself became broken and difficult to work and plow for food and resources. Comparison, lies and competition among other things became an easy inclination. In Genesis 4 we see brother turned against brother with the story of Cain murdering Able because of his jealousy towards him. Since the introduction of sin into the world beginning with Eve, our world has been plagued with injustice throughout history.

Scripture has example after example of this throughout its pages: Joseph's brothers turning on him and selling him into slavery (Genesis 37:12-36), Hebrew enslavement and mistreatment by Egyptians (Exodus 1-12), evil, oppressive rulers like Jezebel (1 and 2 Kings), Nebuchadnezzar (Daniel 1-3), and Herod (Matthew 2) among many others, pagan atrocities like sacrificing children (Psalm 106:37), oppressive witchcraft (2 Kings 21:6), and idolatrous profaning the name of God (Leviticus 18:21) among other practices, mistreatment of the sick, the elderly, the handicapped, and other people living in misfortune that is seen throughout Scripture. The list of examples goes on and on. People have been victims of and practitioners of every kind of injustice imaginable throughout history.

But true, untainted justice enters the world in the incarnate life of Jesus Christ, the second person of the triune Godhead. We see in the Father sending the Son to dwell among men and to ultimately pay the penalty for all injustice, that to bring restoration and justice to the Earth was the plan from the beginning. Despite the chaos and upheaval that

sin caused, a profoundly just God executed the perfect plan of restoring peace and justice to the Earth through Jesus Christ: his life as an example, his death as a payment, and his resurrection as a victory.

First, the life of Jesus: Justice is most clearly and seen and concentrated in the Sermon on the Mount that Jesus spoke in Matthew 5-7. He takes preconceived notions and practices of how godly men were supposed to live, and stretches them into what God had originally intended for his creation. He deals with issues concerning retaliation, loving your enemies, giving to the needy, caring for others, proper treatment of others, etc. Jesus was trailblazing a path to lead people into acting justly in a world that was broken and disheveled. One of the most famous and recognizable fighters for justice and peace, Mahatma Gandhi, was greatly influenced by the Sermon on the Mount, despite his not being a believer in Christ. Dr. Gerald Pillay points out that “it took a non-Christian mind to read the Sermon on the Mount and to discover there a power that was waiting to be unleashed on the world” (Pillay, *Working for Injustice*).

Gandhi, without even believing in the divinity and salvation of Christ, was inspired by the peaceful justice that Jesus was teaching his followers to abide and live by, and we see Gandhi’s incredible example of translating this teaching (among others he was influenced by) through his actions in seeking to find justice in the face of British colonial oppression. So, how much more should believers and followers of Christ be motivated by the teachings and life of Jesus, whom they seek to become more like and exemplify, and seek to insure justice in the world he created and has given them dominion over? Jesus was teaching that justice is to be practiced and fought for by believers despite opposition and attack, and this teaching is radically exemplified this

through his life: he touched the untouchable, loved the unlovable, and did the unthinkable in the name of bringing justice to those who had never dreamed that they were worthy of being cared for or fought for.

Second, the death of Jesus: injustice was brought into the world by the initial injustice of Eve against God. Thus, all abuses against the Earth, against animals, against individuals, against any group or any thing are ultimately transgressions against God, the creator of all things. Sin shattered the peaceful perfection that God had intended for his creation to dwell in, and thus caused an immense chasm that separated man in his imperfections from a perfect and holy God. And God, being perfectly just could not allow transgression and brokenness to go without consequence or payment. We would never expect a judge to allow a thief, an abuser, an embezzler, or a murderer to go free without any consequences. A good parent would not allow their child to talk back, mistreat others, or act out without being punished. So it makes sense that the flawlessly just God, who we also call good Father, would allow consequence and punishment for sin. This punishment is death and separation from him, who cannot, in his holiness, be in the presence of sin.

But, the just God is also merciful in character and nature, and we see this fleshed out in Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross. Jesus lived a sinless life of loving others and bringing justice to the Earth that had turned against God. The perfect Christ died a humiliating, cursed death on the cross, and through this death became the sacrifice for injustice and took on the just wrath of God against all sinfulness to pay the price and mend the shattered relationship between God and man. In the death of Jesus, any man who believes in him was justified before God, because the punishment for his

transgression had been paid. “And if God declares us just in Christ, we are just indeed. We will become people who do justice” (Forster, *How Should We Talk about Justice and the Gospel*). As Forster argues, believers should be motivated to be advocates of justice in the world, because they have been shown ultimate mercy in being justified through the sacrificial death of Christ. Believers are to perform acts of justice and kindness as to exemplify Jesus, their Savior, on Earth, but also are to do so in response to who they have become and the gift of life they have received through the death of Christ.

Finally, the resurrection of Jesus: everything argued and stated thus far would be in vain if it were not for the victorious resurrection of Christ. The Apostle Paul argues that without the resurrection, followers of Christ preach and live in vain and are to be the most pitied (1 Corinthians 15:12-19). This could not be more true. If Jesus had only died and not risen from the dead, he would be only another good example of how to live a loving and peaceful life doing good to and for others. This in itself is not a bad thing, but if the motivation for believers to do justice in the world is based on a dead man who did great things, then they are simply acting based on inspiration from another’s life and not the nature and character of who they are as a new creation in Christ. The resurrection was a necessary victory in that Jesus proved he was God by conquered sin and death, giving a future hope of restoration to all the Earth and all who believe in him.

Jesus is the alive and reigning Son of God on the throne of Heaven. He has promised to one day return to, judge the Earth and its’ inhabitants and usher in the New Heaven and New Earth, which will be inhabited by all those who have been justified by their faith in him and share in his resurrection by the renewal and restoration of their bodies. Pillay wonderfully explains this hope when he exclaims, “anyone who proclaims

the incarnation proclaims that God has come into our time and our history to redeem and to renew. Anybody who proclaims the Resurrection proclaims the freedom of humanity, the transformation of time and space and the declaration of hope. To proclaim resurrected life is in principle to proclaim that all of life is God's. The division between... activism and spirituality ceases to be valid. The Gospel is like light to darkness—light doesn't co-exist alongside darkness. Light supercedes it" (Pillay, *Working for Injustice*).

Pillay argues that the social justice and faith in God are not separate but intricately and irrevocable connected. The gospel is the motivating factor for believers to seek and do justice, because they have been made a new creation. The Holy Spirit dwells within the believer and serves as a guiding and transforming agent to assist in looking and acting more like Jesus in nature and character, how we as creation were always intended to be. So God creates each individual with passions and gifts that cause them to be advocates in a broken and often justiceless world.

However, this is not always the tendency of the church or of believers. Activism is often seen as an activity reserved for specific "passionate people" or "angered people" who want to use their life to fight for change and not viewed as a spiritual response to faith. Pillay accurately lays out the divide we see within the theological and doctrinal spectrum of the church:

Liberals are supposed to be people interested in social justice, who are given to charity and political transformation, concerned about changing the world and involved in contextual issues. Conservatives are supposed to be people who are preoccupied with personal spirituality, piety, concerned with mission and the authority of the Bible. What is tragic about this division—between so-called evangelicals and conservatives on the one hand, and liberals or ecumenicals on the other—

is simply this, that both these aspects of Christian faith belong together. Social justice and spirituality, contextual relevance and biblical authority. They cannot be separated without distorting the Christian message. Indeed, both authority and spirituality, discipleship and caring for the poor, in the early church was always lodged in something else - and this 'something else' is life in God. (Pillay, *Working for Injustice*).

Seeking to bring justice into a world plagued by injustice should be an integral part of a believers' life, because justice is an essential part of the Christian message as a whole: in the past with the story of redemption in Christ, in the present with the activity of the global church and body of believers, and in the future with the expectant hope of Jesus' return and restoration of justice to the world. Differences in orthodoxy and orthopraxy within the church should not have such a drastic effect on how believers from different background view and practice social justice. Through good theology we understand that God is justice and has always fought against injustice, thus believers are to likewise emulate this throughout the world. "The church is not the church if it's not at war with the world's injustice" (Forster, *How Should We Talk about Justice and the Gospel*). Social justice then is not an option, reserved for certain types of people, but rather an response to be made by all believers in light of God's work and word throughout history.

So, social justice is not defined in a specific cause or issue. It is not limited to a specific set of people. It is not measured by the amount of good that is done. No, social justice is a motivation that can be traced back all the way to the beginning of time, when God created man with the gift of being made in the likeness of his image, his character

and nature. Believer and nonbeliever alike are each an individual creation by a God who is merciful, just, and loving and gives specific passions and gifts to each of his creations. Even without realizing, all people seeking to bring forth justice into the world are motivated by the way in which they were crafted by the hand of God and the experiences that God has been sovereign over in their lives. When one becomes a follower of Christ they are filled with the Holy Spirit, who aids in transforming into the image of Christ and guiding in living a life that exemplifies him. Thus, believers in Christ have an elevated motivation to be activists, because they know the truth. “If the gospel bears us justified before God, we are to fight for justice in the midst of an unjust world” (Pillay, *Working for Injustice*).

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