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WHEN DOING GOOD IS NOT GOOD ENOUGH

Justice and Advocacy

Harwood Lockton

The Good Samaritan has much to answer for! Is this all there is to showing a Christian response to those in need? What if the Good Samaritan had returned to the same road down to Jericho the next week and come across the same scenario—and the next week and the next?

Would being a Good Samaritan be sufficient or should he start to think about ways to stop such assaults and hold-ups? What if those bandits were part of an organised-crime syndicate? Does God expect us only to be ambulance drivers administering first aid or should the Christian also work to stem the march of evil and injustice across our globe? Is there more to just doing good?

While initial, hand-out responses are sometimes called for—in emergency situations—many of the issues of human suffering require longer-term responses that seek to correct the injustices that envelop those in need. The proverb “Give a person a fish and you feed them for a day, teach them to fish and you feed them for a lifetime” contains some truth but the good intentions are nullified if the waters in which the person fishes have been polluted by upstream mining from a large foreign-owned corporation.¹

Doing good often requires more than simply the compassionate act of kindness: justice is required and Christians should not shy away from the call for justice on behalf of others.² Indeed the theme of justice saturates the biblical text.³ In this context, there are many calls in the Bible for God’s followers to work for the justice that is an attribute of God’s character. In the cases such as that of Ok Tedi (the polluted waterways mentioned above), the affected communities need advocates who will speak up and speak out.

Speaking up, speaking out

The seeking of justice for others means speaking up for the voiceless, the silenced and those “wronged by society.”⁴ The Bible has an “others” orientation, so advocacy is not pleading one’s own case but pleading and cajoling on behalf of others. The essence of advocacy is that it attempts to influence public policy and practice so as to enhance human wellbeing and human flourishing.

The idea of speaking on behalf of the “voiceless” resonates with many who are well off and enjoy privileged lives. However, in many cases, those suffering injustice are not without their own voice—they are not necessarily “voiceless.” The issue is more fundamental—itself a justice issue—the poor and powerless are often simply not heard by the rich and powerful, who either passively ignore them or, in extreme cases, manipulate things to actively silence those who rightfully protest about their own plight.

God’s word on advocacy

But is advocacy something with which Christians—and especially Adventists—should engage? There are a number of Bible passages that enjoin God’s followers to advocate for those who suffer at the hands of the powerful.

1. *God’s concern for the defence of the vulnerable.*

“He [God] ensures that orphans and widows receive justice. He shows love to the foreigners living among you and gives them food and clothing. So you, too, must show love to foreigners, for you yourselves were once foreigners in the land of Egypt” (Deuteronomy 10:18, 19).

[God is] “Father to the fatherless, defender of widows” (Psalms 68:4).

2. *God’s people are to defend the vulnerable.*

“Help him [the king of Israel] to defend the poor, to rescue the children of the needy, and to crush their oppressors” (Psalms 72:4).

“How long will you hand down unjust decisions by favouring the wicked? Give justice to the poor and the orphan; uphold the rights of the oppressed and the destitute. Rescue the poor and helpless; deliver them from the grasp of evil people” (Psalms 82:2–4).

3. *God’s people are to speak out in defence of the vulnerable.*

“Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves; ensure justice for those being crushed. Yes, speak up for the poor and helpless, and see that they get justice” (Proverbs 31:8, 9).

“Wash yourselves and be clean! Get your sins out of my sight. Give up your evil ways. Learn

to do good. Seek justice. Help the oppressed. Defend the cause of orphans. Fight for the rights of widows" (Isaiah 1:16, 17).

4. *God condemns those who do not defend the vulnerable.*

"Your leaders are rebels, the companions of thieves. All of them love bribes and demand payoffs, but they refuse to defend the cause of orphans or fight for the rights of widows" (Isaiah 1:23).

"The scoffer will be gone, the arrogant will disappear, and those who plot evil will be killed. Those who convict the innocent by their false testimony will disappear. A similar fate awaits those who use trickery to pervert justice and who tell lies to destroy the innocent" (Isaiah 29:20, 21).

"Among my people are wicked men who lie in wait for victims like a hunter hiding in a blind. They continually set traps to catch people. Like a cage filled with birds, their homes are filled with evil plots. And now they are great and rich. They are fat and sleek, and there is no limit to their wicked deeds. They refuse to provide justice to orphans and deny the rights of the poor" (Jeremiah 5:26–28).

"He [Josiah] gave justice and help to the poor and needy, and everything went well for him. Isn't that what it means to know me?" (Jeremiah 22:16).

What is noticeable in these texts is that the general category of the "poor and needy" is usually identified with three specific groups of vulnerable persons: the fatherless, the widows and the aliens. This trio is mentioned some 14 times in the Bible. In each case, these people had no-one to champion and support them. In a patriarchal society such as Old Testament Israel and Judah, it was necessary to have an adult male to provide for one's economic and social survival. Clearly the orphans were without such. For a woman, if she had no significant adult male relative—father, husband, son, brother—she had no economic support and was at the mercy of any non-relative male who might take advantage of her as a servant (if she were old) or as a prostitute (if she were young and good looking).

Interestingly, God also included the resident aliens—those foreigners who had either been taken as slaves or voluntarily had chosen to associate with Israel. Given the divisive issues of asylum seekers and migration in the contemporary world, one wonders what God might say to many of us in the world today.

Or perhaps He has already spoken. The message of these texts is loud, clear, consistent and unambiguous: God's people are to mimic God in focusing on caring for the vulnerable by "defending their cause," "pleading their case" and "speaking up on their behalf."

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Contemporary responses

The church as institution

Zack Plantak has argued in his *The Silent Church: Human Rights and Adventist Social Ethics*⁵ that the institutional Adventist Church from its beginnings until the early 1990s—the end point of his study—has only occasionally advocated for non-self-interest public issues. In the 19th century, the fledgling Adventist church engaged in both compassionate activity for, and advocacy on behalf of, slaves in the United States. The early Adventist Church was also vocal in advocating for temperance, which it saw as a social issue.

In the second half of the 20th century, the issues of race relations and women's rights challenged the corporate church, but primarily from the perspective of debate *within* the church and its employment policies, not that of the wider society. Plantak concludes that our church has largely been silent and has not advocated in the public sphere, except when its own interests have been challenged.

At the 2010 General Conference session, the institutional church issued official statements that, in part, called for advocacy and political action in regard to the global curses of poverty and violence against women and children:

Working to reduce poverty and hunger means more than showing sympathy for the poor. It means *advocating for public policy that offers justice and fairness* to the poor, for their empowerment and human rights.⁶

Seventh-day Adventists commit themselves to being leaders in breaking the cycle of violence perpetrated against women and girls. We will *speak out in defence of victims and survivors* through teaching, preaching, bible study and *advocacy programs*.⁷

What is remarkable about these statements is the clear urging for the church and its members to advocate on matters of global injustice. Unfortunately, little advocacy by the corporate church has occurred since 2010 and few church members are even aware of these statements and their call to action.

The church as individuals

Our church is much more than an institution—it is all those who identify and fellowship with us as Seventh-day Adventists. In fulfilling biblical injunctions, what can we as individuals and local churches do to speak for justice in the broad community?

Individual followers of God and local congregations can do a number of things. As far as global justice issues are concerned—people trafficking, tax evasion through corporate transfer pricing, gender violence, anti-slavery and so many more—the main culprits will be governments and corporate interests. In many countries, politicians in our governments can be contacted, preferably in person, and we can express our concerns and urge them to take actions that will support human wellbeing.

I have found them willing to engage—especially around election time! They seem appreciative that someone is pleading on behalf of *others* and not making a special, self-interested case. Politicians and corporates do

respond to large numbers of letters or emails, provided they are personally written and not just form letters or internet click petitions.

In Australia—and a number of other nations—Micah Challenge⁸ is an active coalition of some 50 Christian non-government organisations and churches that focuses on advocating on behalf of the global poor. Their flagship event “Voices for Justice” is an annual gathering in the national capital when, after various training, small groups of participants speak directly to their elected representatives and senators in their offices at Parliament House. For those inexperienced in talking directly to politicians, it is an excellent means of gaining confidence and becoming known to the nation’s decision makers. The event’s growing popularity, especially among younger people, is evidence of its value and relevance to the participants, and the collective influence Christians have on public policy speaks of its efficacy.

Is a similar approach applicable to reining in powerful corporate interests that trample on the poor and powerless? Again using an Australian example, the major chocolate producers have recently listened to their consumers—Christian and non-Christian—and are now sourcing fair-traded chocolate beans for an increasing number of their chocolate products. These changes were in response to a nationwide public campaign “Don’t Trade Lives,” coordinated by World Vision Australia.⁹

Raising our voice

Whatever way we might choose to defend, plead or use our voice for the injustices that others endure, the important thing is that we do speak up and add our voices to the call for justice so that “justice [might] roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream” (Amos 5:24, NIV). Let’s be clear: the call to justice is as spiritual as it is social and as social as it is spiritual. And it is also in the DNA of our church—the early Adventist pioneers had a radical concern for the whole human being.

Charity may do good but often is insufficient and not good enough. As Adventists, we seem to be comfortable with charity and personal acts of compassion—the hand-out is still popular as a demonstration of our Christian love. But perhaps if we had a greater collective focus on justice there might be a little less need for charity. Let’s respond to the prophets’ repeated call to use our influence on behalf of the fatherless, the widows and the aliens in our world today.

Whatever way we might choose to defend, plead or use our voice for the injustices that others endure, the important thing is that we do speak up.

—Harwood Lockton taught about issues of poverty, inequality and global justice for almost three decades at Avondale College of Higher Education. Immediately prior to retirement, he headed up the international development program for ADRA Australia, a role that demanded advocacy. He continues his journey toward justice as an occasional lecturer at both Avondale and Pacific Adventist University in Papua New Guinea

and has just concluded four years representing ADRA Australia and the Seventh-day Adventist Church on the national campaign steering committee of Micah Challenge Australia. He enjoys his interaction with fellow Adventists at Avondale College Church and with non-Adventists in his local bushwalking club.

1. A classic example is the devastation of local communities along the Fly River in Papua New Guinea by the tailings waste from the huge Ok Tedi mine, until recently owned by the Australian company BHP, the world's largest mining corporation.
2. Justice in this context implies the application of "the concepts of fairness, equality and righteousness," see Edwin Cook, "The Parameters of Social Justice and Natural Law Theory," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society*, Vol 18, 2007, pages 64–80.
3. *The Poverty and Justice Bible* (The Bible Society (UK), 2008) claims there are more than 2000 verses in the Bible dealing with the justice issues of rich-poor relations, exploitation and oppression. However, these multiple references have often been ignored by the Christian church in favour of the far fewer verses that focus on personal morality, for example the 90 or so references to sexual relationships (Glen Stassen and David Gushee, *Kingdom Ethics*, InterVarsity Press, 2003).
4. See Joshua Hordern, "Justice: Rights and Wrongs. An Overview," *Studies in Christian Ethics*, Vol 23, 2010, pages 118–29.
5. Zdravko Plantak, *The Silent Church: Human Rights and Adventist Social Ethics*, Macmillan Press, 1998.
6. <www.adventist.org/information/official-statements/article/go/0/global-poverty>, emphasis added.
7. <www.adventist.org/information/official-statements/article/go/0/ending-violence-against-women-and-girls/>, emphasis added.
8. <www.michchallenge.org.au>. The Micah Challenge International website is at <www.micahchallenge.org>.
9. <<http://campaign.worldvision.com.au/campaigns/dont-trade-lives/>>.