

Evangelism and social justice

If it's the Gospel and not social justice that meets our need for salvation, shouldn't evangelism be our priority?

Given the Church's limited time and resources, should we not focus on evangelism above all else?

This booklet explores the relationship between evangelism and social justice. The Bible is clear that both are integral to our faith. We are called both to make disciples and to love our neighbour – as part of the same faith. As the 'salt' of the land, the Church is required to play a part in God's wider plan, including for the redemption of society as a whole. Further, social justice has a key part to play in our evangelism. As the early Church demonstrated, the living word is received best when it is not only proclaimed but also lived out by its followers.

How can these principles guide us in our mission today?



The tension

If we cut out from the Bible every reference to justice or evangelism, how much of a Bible would we have left? Clearly both are key themes throughout, but some people make an argument for prioritising evangelism over social justice.

Such an argument is based around emphasising different needs. First, it asserts that an individual's *ultimate* need is to be reconciled to God through salvation. Social justice may meet some needs, but as it does not bring this reconciliation it can only ever meet a *secondary* need.

Following from this, the argument also states that we can distinguish between *eternal* and *temporary* needs. Social justice, through bringing change on this earth alone, is temporary. Coming to faith and being reconciled to God is of eternal significance.

Within the context of the Church's limited time and resources, a simple prioritisation can be made. Through evangelism we can help others to meet this *ultimate* and *eternal* need. In comparison, though social justice may be good and valuable, it only meets a *secondary* and *temporary* need.

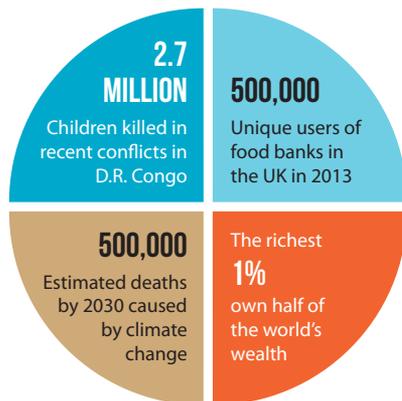
Whether we accept this argument depends on how we understand being 'reconciled' to God. In the Bible this ultimate need of reconciliation includes social justice at its heart. Our reconciliation to God goes hand in hand with reconciliation to our neighbour. In other words, the Gospel's radical power cannot be confined to 'religious belief' or the 'spiritual' sphere alone, but rather demands social transformation. The Bible does not attach a *secondary* significance to social justice: faith must find its natural outworking in action. As integral components of the same faith, it is not a question of *either* social justice *or* evangelism, but always *both* together.

This view also leads us to question the idea that social justice only meets a *temporary* need. First, as God's command, it is of *eternal* significance for us as Christians. Second, evangelism and social justice are both elements of the Church's mission to be salt and light. As we will see, God's wider redemptive plan for the world takes place both 'now', and 'not yet'.

"As integral components of the same faith, it is not a question of either social justice or evangelism, but always both together."

Finally, this booklet discusses the role that social justice plays in effective evangelism. As modelled by the early Church, the 'living word' must not only be proclaimed but actively lived out, with our good deeds forming a compelling demonstration of the faith we confess.

In short then, we can say that faith is more than evangelism, social justice is part of a wider redemptive mission, and evangelism is more than proclamation.



What is social justice?

'Social justice' is a term often used with little definition. In the Old Testament, two key Hebrew terms are used in the context of justice: *mišpāṭ* and *šedeq*, often translated as 'justice' and 'righteousness'.

Mišpāṭ comes from a verb meaning to judge or govern; to act as lawgiver; to decide controversy, condemn or punish. The noun *mišpāṭ* can mean several things, including the act of deciding a case; the seat of judgment; a legal sentence or decision; or the execution of judgment. The word *šedeq* (righteousness) means what is right, just and normal – whether in speech, government, or even the weights and measures described in Deuteronomy 25:15.

In *Generous Justice*, Tim Keller argues that *mišpāṭ* can be understood as 'rectifying justice', restoring justice where it has been lost. *Šedeq* refers to 'primary justice' – the conditions of right relationship that, if practised, would render rectifying justice unnecessary. Together, these two terms can help us to understand what 'social justice' means. 'Doing' social justice includes not only the righting of wrongs, but the generosity and social concern which would prevent injustices arising in the first place.

All this plays out within the context of relationships. Injustices imply abusive relationships between powerful and vulnerable. These unjust relationships can happen both on a personal level, such as between an exploitative manager and a low-paid worker, and on a societal and structural level, such as discrimination against an ethnic minority group.

“Social justice can be summarised as the creation and restoration of right relationships in society”

Rectifying these unjust relationships involves the creation of right relationships based on biblical principles. In particular, one useful principle for structuring right relationships is to think about the Hebrew word *ḥesed*. Often translated as 'mercy', its meaning is best described as 'loving kindness'. It is used to characterise relationships of grace, compassion, faithfulness and love – so bringing about justice, righteousness and holiness in relationships.

Overall, social justice can be summarised as the creation and restoration of right relationships in society.



What does the Bible say?

Social justice: integral to faith



Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: 'Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?' Jesus replied: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.'" This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: "Love your neighbour as yourself." All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.'
Matthew 22:34-40

In this passage, known as the Great Commandment, Jesus explains that every Old Testament law is designed to protect and strengthen the relationships between God and neighbour. Jesus, as the fulfilment of the law (Matthew 5:17), brings us hope that these two relationships will be restored to their right state. In this way, the fulfilment of Isaiah 61 (as declared in Luke 4) is good news for the poor, the imprisoned and the oppressed; not only in terms of being reconciled with God but in terms of restoring right relationships of justice, compassion and generosity between people in society.



'The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'
Luke 4:18-19

The good news of the Gospel is one of transformation in our social relationships. This should come as no surprise. While our culture maintains a clear division between the 'secular' social sphere and the 'sacred' spiritual sphere, such a distinction is not biblical. Passages such as Isaiah 58 show us the error of thinking the all-powerful sovereign Lord God's commands can be neatly confined within 'religion' and not impact social and economic relationships.

This reflects a principle seen throughout the Bible: faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead (James 2:14-17). The everyday material and social world may seem mundane, but these are the settings in which our faith is acted out in the world.

Matthew 25:31-46 is a similarly stark warning – for Christians, the command to act justly is not optional or secondary, but of eternal significance.



'Then the King will say to those on his right, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was ill and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'"
Matthew 25:34-36

Reconciliation to God is also reconciliation to neighbour, or in other words, social justice. This is no awkward or secondary 'add on' to our faith, but rather, simply our faith put into action

across all spheres of society. Ultimately, social justice, like evangelism, is an integral aspect of our faith – we can't prioritise one at the expense of the other, but must seek to do both.

The Church and God's redemptive mission

The previous section highlighted how social justice is an integral outworking of our personal faith as individuals reconciled to God. At the same time, we must understand how social justice

fits into God's wider redemptive mission for fallen creation, and the role that we together as 'Church' can play within it.

The Fall broke our relationships with God, each other and Creation (Genesis 3:8, 15, 17). As we have already seen, Jesus came to repair these relationships. John Stott describes this moment as the 'breaking in of the

kingdom'; the good news that God's renewed creation is coming, and so there is the hope of redemption of all things in this age. However, at the same time, the kingdom has not yet been brought into perfection, and so we still work within the limits of our broken selves and world. The Church serves in the 'in between times'; between kingdom come and kingdom coming, between the 'now' and the 'not yet' of redemption.



'You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot. You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.'

Matthew 5:13-16

The Church's role can be described as both 'serving' and 'waiting' for this full

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Daniel Strange



redemption (1 Thessalonians 1:9-10). In serving, Jesus instructs the Church to be both salt and light (Matthew 5:13-16). In the same way that salt acts as a preservative, we are given the task of preventing moral decay in society. This will involve speaking up, acting and praying. Meanwhile, our good deeds will shine as a light guiding people to the glory of the Father. Though we wait for God to bring redemption in all its fullness and perfection, we do know that our service for the Lord is not in vain (1 Corinthians 15:58).

“The gospel of Jesus Christ is not just a word; it is a living word”

James Gustafson

summarised by Daniel Strange, our mission is to ‘seek to make disciple-making disciples: followers of Jesus that love him, love each other and love the world, all the while seeking to give reasons for the hope that we have.’¹

In short, the mission of the Church is to seek the *redemption, renewal and reconciliation* that Jesus began, in our relationships with both God and our neighbour. As

Evangelism: more than proclamation

A good place to start for our model of evangelism is the early Church. For them, caring for each other materially was simply part of their demonstration of the Gospel which they proclaimed. Through the radically generous relationships which the believers had in fellowship, the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved (Acts 2). Social responsibility was pursued both on a collective level (Acts 6) and on a personal level, even for the ‘full time’ evangelists (Galatians 2:10).

They did this because they knew that a distinctive and counter-cultural living out of God’s love was the evangelism that Jesus taught; that by loving one another, ‘everyone will know that you are my disciples’ (John 13:35), like a light that will ‘shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.’ (Matthew 5:16).

The gospel of love, hope and restoration is not understood through



a simple process of intellectual reasoning. Spoken proclamation in itself will rarely be enough for it to make sense for the seeker; trust in the credibility of the messenger, as well the message, is needed. In other words, our demonstrations of the distinctive love of Christ will affect the plausibility of our proclamation.

From the Bible's perspective, evangelism defined as merely the verbal expression of the good news forms a very narrow understanding of the term. As Gustafson explains, 'The gospel of Jesus Christ is not just a word; it is a living word'. At its fullest, it is not only 'propositional statements' but 'the incarnation of the Word of God into the cultures and lives of mankind.'²

Seeking social justice is part of the demonstration of the truth and credibility of the Gospel we proclaim. The Word is seen to be the Living Word because it is lived out. This isn't to say that we can do away with proclamation; without it our deeds are like signposts pointing to nowhere. Instead, we must do both together.

Application to university context

Applying these ideas to our university context can often be challenging. At the back of this guide are links to some helpful online resources. To start with, here are some general pointers for what seeking social justice might look like as a student today.

Advocacy

- *Political freedoms.* Living in a democracy, we are able to petition our political leaders to use the mechanisms of government to the advantage of the most vulnerable. Remember, MPs are legally obliged to respond to their constituents' writings.
- *Raising awareness.* 'You may choose to look the other way but you can never

say again that you did not know.' – William Wilberforce.

Often inaction is simply a result of ignorance, especially in the 'student bubble', where many injustices are hidden from sight.

Action

- *Generous giving.* Even on student budgets, we can always sacrifice in order to give. Remember the value of even the poor widow's offering (Luke 21).
- *Volunteering.* There are many ways to give time usefully; foodbanks, services for the elderly or the homeless are just some examples.
- *Ethical lifestyles.* There are lots of links at the back of this booklet on how to change our daily lifestyles to better impact others. Unfortunately, our 'inaction' is often a form of 'action', perpetuating global inequalities and environmental harm.
- *Careers.* What we dedicate our working lives to after university is a scary but exciting decision. How will you use it to serve others?

Prayer

- Encountering social injustices can rightly be deeply troubling, but should not paralyse us into despair and inaction. We can draw strength from the one who has overcome the world (John 16:33).
- We believe that the Bible provides a framework for structuring right relationships on both a personal and societal level. Through a prayerful reading of scripture we hope to discern this.

¹ Daniel Strange, Cinnamon Theology Symposium, 2015

² The Integration of Development and Evangelism, James W. Gustafson *Missiology: An International Review*, WJL. XXVI, No.2, April 1998

JUST LOVE

Just Love

Just Love is a movement that aims to inspire and release every Christian student to pursue social justice through advocacy, action and prayer. We have groups in various universities across the country engaging with issues such as homelessness, human trafficking and ethical lifestyle.

We'd love you to get involved. To find out if there's a Just Love group at your university, check out our website: <http://www.justloveuk.com/>. If there isn't one, why not consider setting one up? You can get in contact with us on Twitter @JustLove_UK or email us at info@justloveuk.com

Other groups

Here are some groups with great resources and expertise in particular areas, do look them up!

Tearfund Rhythms:
<http://rhythms.org/>

The Christian Aid Collective:
<http://www.christianaidcollective.org/>

International Justice Mission:
<http://www.ijm.org>

Christians in Politics:
<http://www.christiansinpolitics.org.uk/>

Christian Action, Research and Education (CARE):
<http://www.care.org.uk/>

Jubilee Centre

This booklet was written by Andrew Lawrence in conjunction with the Jubilee Centre, a social reform charity that aims to articulate a biblical framework for public life and equip Christian leaders to be salt and light in a secular world.



<http://www.jubilee-centre.org/>

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