David McIlroy

Why do Evangelicals have Nothing to say about Justice?

This article poses the issue of where as evangelicals we are in our perceptions and actions on justice. David McIlroy suggests that our recent history has left us with a black hole in our biblical study and our theology. An extended review of McIlroy’s book appears later in this issue.

When I am asked why I wrote my book *A Biblical View of Law and Justice* I sometimes answer flippantly: ‘because no-one else has written a decent book on the subject for five hundred years’. It’s not entirely true, of course. There is a well-documented tradition of Christian political thought out there, but, with few honourable exceptions, its use of the Bible is sporadic rather than systematic and smacks all too often of applying a text as a label to a position already reached on other grounds.

Why is this the case? Why did I have to abandon proposed doctoral studies on the evangelical view of law because I could not see that evangelicals actually had anything approaching a common debate, let alone a common mind on the issue? The answer is, I think, to be found in two places: history and our lack of attention to the Bible, in particular the Hebrew Scriptures.

A brief historical survey

Those evangelicals who do care about justice and social reform point to men like Wilberforce and Shaftesbury. Evangelical public action in favour of the poor and the oppressed and the working underclass was a vibrant force in British life in the nineteenth century. However, in the twentieth century it retreated. Undoubtedly a major cause was the false alternatives presented in the controversy over the so-called ‘social gospel’. As liberals made the social dimensions of the gospel into the whole gospel, so evangelicals responded by abandoning the social dimensions of the gospel in favour of evangelism. No longer was it about saving people, it was now about saving souls. Ironically, the very existence of the social gospellers made it possible for evangelicals to conduct this retreat. In the first sixty years of the twentieth century it was the Methodists (principally via the Labour party) and Anglicans like William Temple who kept a Christian perspective on justice visible in the public square.

The premillennialist, dispensational teachings of Darby and Schofield were part of this retreat. They were widely received in twentieth-century evangelicalism in
both Britain and the United States. They led to an attitude in which the world is a
sinking ship and evangelicals are the rats who are deserting it. Two World Wars
didn’t help either as they consolidated an attitude of retreat from an evil world.
The current success of the *Left Behind* series is testimony to the enduring pull of
these ideas on an anxious generation unsure of whether it can do anything to make
difference to our endangered world.

Then came the 1960s. The liberalisation of abortion, the abolition of criminal
penalties for homosexual activity in private, the development of television as a
mass medium, and the social changes which accompanied this epoch awoke
evangelicals to the fact that if they had nothing to say in the public arena they
could not complain when their social views were ignored. The characteristic
reaction to a social problem has been moralistic with regard to legislation, although
on abortion, family life and in some other areas such as debt counselling, good
compassionate social action is taking place through evangelical agencies.

Evangelicals have, actually, rediscovered a social conscience. The establishment
and success of TEAR Fund and the Lausanne Covenant are testimony to this, but
the kind of agenda pursued has an odd skew to it. The focus seems to be on issues
of justice abroad, but on morality at home though this is probably simply a result
of the evangelical groups engaged in these areas.

Our lack of attention to the Bible, in particular the Old Testament

The second factor is that evangelicals are ignorant of the Bible’s message about
justice. It’s all down to how we read the Bible. Actually, most Bible-believing
Christians don’t. In our 24/7 world, the cappuccino has replaced the quiet time
as our preferred source of inner refreshment. Those of us who do read the Bible
have Scripture Union or EDWJ to thank. These provide us with snack-size portions
of scripture, suitable for swift digestion. Graeme Goldsworthy argues in *Gospel and
Kingdom* that perhaps it is naive to expect all of the Bible to yield its treasures if
read in such a monochrome way. It works well with the short stories in the Gospels
and with the densely written Pauline epistles where you trip over a conflicting
interpretation every second word. It works very badly with the Old Testament law
and prophets. Much of the force of the prophets’ message is achieved by repetition
The result is that their message is ignored. We have never taken it in.

If we do read the prophets we mine them for messianic prophecies and gloss
over what was actually the bulk of their message, which was a condemnation of
social and religious conditions in their time. It was because things were so unjust
and behaviour so unrighteous that messianic intervention was required. For those
with eyes to see, Jesus’ Nazareth manifesto picks up on this in Isaiah 61 and the
idea of Jubilee.

The other problem is that we are not helped by our language. The word
‘righteousness’ is used in English to translate two key words: *Tsedeq* in the Old
Testament and *dikaiosyne* in the New Testament. Yet it has become a religious word
never used in ordinary conversation. In French, such words are translated as
‘justice’. Righteousness is in truth about justice and holiness. If all the discussions
in theology carried out using the word ‘righteousness’ were replaced by the term
‘justice’, then our theology would have a very different slant. Wilberforce knew this and therefore campaigned both against the injustice of slavery and for the reform of morals.

Another word which the English language strips down from its biblical meaning is *shalom*. The anodyne word ‘peace’ does not capture the connotations of order, harmony and right relationships which are part of the Hebrew idea.

All of this means that there is work to be done to integrate into our lives what I believe are fundamental biblical insights:

1) God is concerned for the poor, for those at a relational, social and material disadvantage;

2) This is a key part of the messianic expectation and of Jesus’ mission;

3) Working for earthly justice is a Christian calling, compatible with and flowing from the calling to announce the character of our God who creates justice, liberates the victims of injustice and justifies the unjust.

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