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# 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 a 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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