

# BIBLICAL JUSTICE AND MISSION THEOLOGY

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## **Introduction**

A criticism of the evangelical church worldwide has been that it has largely ignored issues of justice, as they relate to the mission of the church. A corrective, brought to evangelicals by more liberal branches of the church, has been an awakening to the biblical call to justice. This paper explores what “justice” means, particularly in its application to mission theology. It will be demonstrated that an application of the biblical context of justice into our ministry context is an essential element of any ministry.

## **Definitions**

The word “justice” occurs 134 times in the NIV Old Testament.<sup>1</sup> The English-language term “justice” is most commonly, though not exclusively, a translation of the Hebrew word מִשְׁפָּט (*mishpat*). *Mishpat* is used 420 times in the Hebrew Old Testament, and is also translated as “judgment” or “righteousness”. The word is the most-significant Hebrew word for describing all forms of government and process, both human and divine.

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<sup>1</sup> 116 times in the American Standard Version, 28 times in the King James Version, 138 times in the New American Standard Version, and 125 times in the Revised Standard Version.

“Justice” is also translated from **תְּשׁוּבָה** (*ts<sup>e</sup>daqah*), a word more commonly rendered in English translations as “righteousness”.<sup>2</sup> As is the case with *mishpat*, this is a legal word, often used to describe relationships, where the parties are expected to be, or are, faithful to one another. On rare occasions justice is also translated into English from the Hebrew word **דָּיָן** (*diyn*), which, essentially, has the meaning of “governing”.<sup>3</sup>

In the New Testament, “justice” is most frequently translated from **δικαιοσύνη**, although the Greek word also has a broader meaning than can be fully described by the word “justice”. The word **δικαιοσύνη** is more commonly translated as “righteousness”, applied as a characteristic of a judge, or of justice, of the lives men should live before God, as a compelling motive for the conduct of life, and, particularly, in the writings of Paul, as a characteristic of God.

In Matt 12:18; 12:20; 23:23 the word “justice” is translated from the Greek **κρίσις**, while in Luke 18:3, 5, 7, 8 it is translated from **ἐκδικέω**.

## **Justice Throughout the Bible**

### ***Justice in Particular Books of the Bible and the Link to Missiology Deuteronomy***

Foundational to the study of justice, and its link to missiology, in the book of Deuteronomy, is God’s selection of Abraham, which serves God’s missiological purpose for the nations. Through Abraham, and so, ultimately, through Israel, God planned to bring blessings to the nations.

The ethical and moral demands God placed on Israel significantly impact this purpose. Israel is to continue in the path of justice that the Lord laid down for Abraham in Gen 18:19, so the Lord might bring about what was promised to Abraham through Israel. Such particularity, with all its moral and ethical demands, has a universal

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<sup>2</sup> The word is translated in a number of ways, for example in Gen 30:33 the NIV translates it as “honesty”.

<sup>3</sup> Esther 7:25, Job 36:17 are examples of this word, which occurs some 23 times in the Hebrew Old Testament.

application. Throughout the book, the nations are watching Israel,<sup>4</sup> and will see both blessing in obedience, and punishment in disobedience.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, there is a thorough link between Israel's missionary role and the social justice they exhibit, both to those inside the covenant community, as well as to those outside.

The exposition of the social justice laws begins very early in Deuteronomy. In chapter one, Moses sets forth God's commands in relation to judicial matters. Judges are to judge righteously (*ts<sup>e</sup>daqah*), in matters between Israelites, as well as in matters involving aliens (*גֵּר*, *ger*). Equal status before the law of God underpins the Hebrew law.<sup>6</sup> No man, Israelite or alien, is to be feared, for justice is of God.

Deut 4:5-8 highlights the positive missiological significance of justice, as it is found in Deuteronomy. A constant theme running through the Old Testament is Israel's role as representative of Yahweh on the world stage. Obedience to the statutes of God was not for Israel's benefit alone, but also for the nations around them. Ideally the nations will:

hear about all these decrees, that is, they will notice, and enquire, and take interest in, the phenomenon of Israel as a society, with all the social, economic, legal, political, and religious dimensions of the Torah. And that social justice system will lead them to the conclusion that Israel, as a people, qualify as a great nation, regarded as wise and understanding.<sup>7</sup>

In chapter five Moses reiterates the Decalogue and the fourth commandment (observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy). Again, this law did not only apply to the Israelite, but to the *ger* as well. The breaking of this law, and the accompanying economic oppression, is a theme picked up strongly by Amos.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Deut 4:6-8; 28:10.

<sup>5</sup> Deut 28:37, 29:22-25.

<sup>6</sup> See also Ex 12:49; Lev 24:22; Deut 29:10ff; 31:12ff.

<sup>7</sup> Christopher Wright, *Deuteronomy*, New International Biblical Commentary, Peabody MA: Hendrickson, 1996, p. 47.

<sup>8</sup> Amos 8:5.

An ethical question raised by Deuteronomy, and linked to the question of justice, relates to the moral rightness of Israel's invasion of foreign soil. Our answer must surely be found in an understanding of the universality of God's justice and His determination to see justice done, for clearly the wickedness of the Canaanites is the harbinger of their destruction. God's impartiality in judgment is demonstrated in that what he did to the Canaanites in punishing them for their wickedness, he also threatened to do and ultimately did to the Israelites because of their consistent wickedness.

Deut 10:17-19 begins with an affirmation of Yahweh's universal ownership of the world, and then brings justice down to a very intimate level. Yahweh's justice is demonstrated through His love for the alien. This statement is followed by what Wright calls the Deuteronomic equivalent to the second greatest commandment.<sup>9</sup> Israel is to respond to the love of God, which was demonstrated to them through the Exodus, by showing love to the alien.

### **Summary**

"Walking the way of the Lord" is an accurate summary of the message of Deuteronomy. "It implies a whole orientation of personal and social life toward the values, priorities, and will of God, including commitment to justice and compassion, integrity and purity."<sup>10</sup>

### **The Psalms**

The Psalms are a collection of 150 cultic songs of praise, which express the relationship between God and His people. Justice and righteousness are mentioned a number of times through the Psalms.<sup>11</sup> A number of the references describe justice in the terms identified above, things, such as, justice being a character quality of God, and a moral requirement for the righteous.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> "Fear the Lord your God and serve Him" (Deut 10:19), Wright, *Deuteronomy*, p. 150.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 174-175.

<sup>11</sup> *Mishpat* and *ts'daqah* are frequently used together.

<sup>12</sup> A sample of references would include Ps 9:16, which speaks of God having been revealed through his justice; 11:7 and 45:6-7, which affirm God's love of justice; and 97:2, which speaks of justice as the foundation of the throne of God.

The Psalms affirm the universality of God's justice. The practical outworking of this is identified in Ps 9:8, God will judge the world in righteousness, and exercise judgment for all people with equality. Despite Israel's election, they are not advantaged, in relation to the judgment of God. Yahweh exercises His judgment and justice impartially. What is the foundation for this? The universality of God's judgment is a right of God, based on His creation, and lordship over all creation. This theme is picked up repeatedly in the Psalms. Everything in creation owes its genesis to the Lord God, who is a God of justice.<sup>13</sup>

It is significant that justice is mentioned so frequently in the context of worship. The prophets are blunt in their condemnation of Israel's worship, when it is undertaken in an environment where justice is lacking. A good relationship with God is impossible, where fellow human beings are being treated unjustly.<sup>14</sup> True worship can only exist in the context of justice. Without justice being exercised, worship will always be lacking.

The Psalmist forges a strong link between justice and the poor. God's justice is exercised on behalf of the poor,<sup>15</sup> and God's representatives, such as the king, are also expected to exercise justice on behalf of those who are oppressed.<sup>16</sup>

### ***The 8th-century Prophets: Amos and Micah***

The 8th-century prophets prophesied at a time of relative prosperity for the divided kingdom of Israel and Judah. Amos prophesied in the context of prosperity, idolatry, extravagant indulgence, luxurious living, immorality, corruption of judicial procedures, and oppression of the poor. Amos called for social justice, as an indispensable expression of true piety. Likewise, Micah prophesied during a time of economic prosperity under kings Uzziah and Jotham, but at a time which was also characterised by a strong current of materialism, disintegrating values, and reliance on the rites, rather than the meaning, of religion.

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<sup>13</sup> Ps 97:2.

<sup>14</sup> See also Hos 12:5; 10:4, 11-18; Amos 2:6; 5:11; Mic 6:5-8.

<sup>15</sup> Ps 140:12.

<sup>16</sup> Ps 72:1-4.

Amos 5:7 and 5:12 appear to be the foundation to the charges laid by the prophet against the people, who turn justice into bitterness, and oppress the righteous, and deprive the poor. The people, to whom Amos addresses his prophecy, had divorced the ethics of their businesses, politics, and social structures from the cult. "They think worshipping God is one thing, and that business or politics is another, and that there is no connection between the two worlds."<sup>17</sup>

The message of Amos highlights an underlying principle, which has already been identified, in the discussion on the Psalms and justice. True worship of God can only take place in an environment, where the justice of God is being appropriated by people. The complaint, Amos has against the people, is their attempt to participate in the ritual of cultic worship, without an attendant outworking of justice. Amos is quite emphatic in his belief that the two necessarily compliment one another. There is a strong message for the contemporary church in the historical message of Amos.

Micah's theme of justice not also touches the religious function of the society, but also the political, judicial, and economic powers. Like his contemporaries, he prophesied at a time, when possession of land was the primary measure of wealth, and disenfranchisement from the land almost inevitably led to poverty.<sup>18</sup> Unlike Isaiah, who presents concrete accusations, with concrete consequences,<sup>19</sup> Micah underlines the human and moral dimension of the crimes, and sees the outworking of injustice

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<sup>17</sup> Amos 8:4-6. Norman Snaith, *The Distinctive Ideas of the Old Testament*, London UK: Epworth Press, 1944, p. 55.

<sup>18</sup> It is important to note the role the jubilee legislation had in protecting the primogenital rights of land ownership. The jubilee ideally forced the reversion of ownership to the original landowner, a law designed to protect those who, for whatever reason, had become landless. Some question the practical application of this law, even suggesting that the law was only ever an idealistic principle [see Raymond Westbrook, *Property and Family Law in the Bible*, Sheffield UK: JSOT, 1991, pp. 1-20], however, the law highlights two things: (1) All land ultimately belongs to Yahweh, and His people are but landlords, given care of the land; (2) The justice of Yahweh is a superior justice.

<sup>19</sup> Is 5:8.

in very human terms, using graphic language to describe the injustices.<sup>20</sup>

Micah also gives us a very poignant summary of what the Lord actually requires of His people, “to act justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God”.<sup>21</sup>

### ***Isaiah 40-55***

The entire book of Isaiah is a rich quarry of information relating to the theme of justice. Justice plays an important part in Isaiah’s formulation of his theology of God. God’s holiness, judgment, and eschatological rule, are all characterised by justice.<sup>22</sup> The corollary of this is that God requires justice to be a characteristic of His people, and, throughout the book, Israel is severely criticised for failing to administer justice.<sup>23</sup> The experience of the exile is attributed to Israel’s covenantal unfaithfulness, which has included a failure to administer justice. Is 58 is perhaps the most striking of the passages in Isaiah, which makes this link, for the type of fast, the Lord chooses, is to loose the chains of injustice, untie the cords of the yoke, and set the oppressed free.

Deutero-Isaiah is of particular interest, because of the focus on the nations, and the link between justice and the nations. The interpretation of the Hebrew word *mishpat* is very significant, for the way in which the link between mission and justice is understood. As has been identified in the discussion above, there are subtle nuances in the meaning of the word, and in the context of Deutero-Isaiah, the uses of *mishpat* could be positive references, or negative references, when they are applied to the nations. Consequently, the scholarly world is divided over what the missiological emphasis actually is in these chapters. On one side of the debate, stand the particularists,<sup>24</sup> who argue there is no message of salvation for the nations in these chapters. Universalists,<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Mic 3:1-3; 7:2-3.

<sup>21</sup> Mic 6:8.

<sup>22</sup> A significant number of references could be supplied, including Is 5:7; 9:7; 11:4; 16:5; 28:6; 30:18; et al.

<sup>23</sup> Is 10:2; 56:1; et al.

<sup>24</sup> Represented by Norman Snaith, DeBoer, R. N. Whybray, et al.

<sup>25</sup> Represented by scholars, such as Westermann, Blenkinsopp, Davidson, et al.

however, understand terms such as *mishpat*, and phrases such as “covenant for the peoples, and light to the nations” to have universalistic applications. Missiologists, consequently, understand Is 40-55 as the climax of Old Testament missionary consciousness.

To advance the discussion, we need to be able achieve a synthesis between the views, which appears to lie in being able to maintain a tension between universalism and particularism. Throughout these chapters, there is a strong emphasis on the restoration of Israel, and part of a focus on the restoration of Israel is a focus on the judgment of Israel’s enemies, particularly Babylon. However, the pledge of restoration for Israel contains within it an even-greater restoration, for the restoration of Israel goes back to the Abrahamic covenant, with the attendant blessing for the nations.

*Mishpat* is, therefore, both a positive and a negative concept in Deutero-Isaiah. Mowinckel and Gelston<sup>26</sup> understand *mishpat* in a way similar to its use in 2 Kings 17:26 or Jer 5:4 and 8:7, where it refers to an ordinance, or right religion. Thus, they argue, the justice, which the servant delivers, is the establishment of the practice of true religion among the nations, ultimately serving the goal that the prophet sets out to achieve, “so that, from the rising of the sun, to the place of its setting, there is none beside me. I am the Lord, and there is no other.”<sup>27</sup> Justice, according to this interpretation, is intimately linked to the missionary nature of Deutero-Isaiah. Furthermore, the notion of God’s justice, as a light to the nations, is a fairly explicit reference to the missionary nature of justice.<sup>28</sup>

### ***The New Testament***

While the missiologists continue to identify the missiological nature of the Old Testament, few attempt to deny the vibrant mission-mindedness of the New Testament. Where does justice fit into centrifugal mission?

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<sup>26</sup> A. Gelston, “The Missionary Message of Second Isaiah”, in *Scottish Journal of Theology* 18 (1965), pp. 308-318.

<sup>27</sup> Is 45:6.

<sup>28</sup> Whybray argues this is an obscure term, which has no salvation overtones, however, a word study, which looks into the way the phrase is used in other parts of the bible (cf. Ps 119:105) demonstrates it is frequently used as a positive reference to salvation.

The theme of justice, as a characteristic of God, continues very strongly. God will judge the world in righteousness, the kingdom of God is about righteousness, and God's righteousness abounds forever.<sup>29</sup> In Jesus Christ, however, the righteousness of God has been revealed in a new and significant way. This is a major theme in Romans, where Paul argues the gospel he preaches is entirely consistent with, indeed, actually reveals, the righteousness of God. This righteousness is available to people, quite apart from the law, through faith in Christ Jesus. Therefore, individuals are no longer slaves to sin, but slaves to righteousness – righteousness available to anyone who believes.<sup>30</sup>

One danger, we need to avoid, is theologising the concept of justice. Justice was to be a characteristic, which set apart the nation of Israel in Old Testament times. The survey, above, indicates God's continual desire for His people to be a people of justice. This does not change in the New Testament period. The newly-born Christian community was to be characterised by righteousness, which had (and continues to have) strong ethical implications. The gospel authors highlight justice as a key theme in the mission of Jesus. Luke works with the theme of the coming of Jesus as Jubilee. Luke 4:16-21 is frequently cited by those, who emphasise Christian social responsibility. The Beatitudes have a strong theme of political and social justice underlying them. The New Testament concept of justice is in no way discontinuous with that of the Old Testament, justice continues to be a characteristic, which defines the people of God in the new community.

### ***Who are the Poor?***

There are a number of cognates used to describe the poor in the English Bible. Words such as "poor", "needy", "downtrodden", "afflicted", or "humble" are often used to describe those in particular need. As the theme of justice frequently intersects with the concept of the poor, it is useful to understand what this term means in the context of the Bible.

The Hebrew word אֲנִי (*ani*, "poor") is used 77 times in the Old Testament, and, literally, denotes a person, who is bowed down, or who

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<sup>29</sup> Acts 17:1; Rom 14:17; 2 Cor 9:9.

<sup>30</sup> Rom 3:21, 22; 6:18, 19, 20; 10:3.

occupies a lowly position. It is a word, which denotes relationship, though, strikingly, it is never contrasted to “rich”, but with the man of violence, or the oppressor, who puts the *ani* in his lowly position, and keeps him there.<sup>31</sup> The concept of the poor does not emerge in the patriarchal period. Moses makes reference to the justice, which is to be extended to the *ger*, but no mention is made of poor, precisely because the nomadic and tribal nature of Israel’s existence precluded the possibility of poor existing among them. Tribal society was such that everyone shared in the riches of the tribe, even those who were welcomed in as outsiders. The poor, as a social class, really only developed in Israelite culture, as the people became more settled, and land ownership became more common.

Boerma concludes that, in the Bible, poverty is directly connected with the structures, within which men live. He says, “Poverty does not develop of its own accord. People do not become poor, because they are idle, they become idle, because they are poor.”<sup>32</sup> Boerma further observes that, in all the early Israelite literature, the poor man is never seen as the cause of poverty, only in the later texts, such as Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, which emerged from the royal courts, is the poor man blamed for his situation.

There is a strong link between righteousness and the poor. The survey of the biblical concept of justice reveals defending the rights of the poor is an essential part of the biblical way of justice for individuals and governments.<sup>33</sup> The Messiah, who embodies the righteousness of God, will be found on the side of the poor. Jeremiah equates the care for the needy with knowing God.<sup>34</sup>

In the New Testament, the concept of the poor is pervasive, as well as quite broad. The Greek terms denote the working poor, who have no property, and who survive on a day-to-day basis, and the beggar, who is totally reliant on the generosity of the passer-by. Theologically, the

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<sup>31</sup> Conrad Boerma, *Rich Man, Poor Man, and the Bible*, London UK: SCM Press, 1979, p. 7.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>33</sup> Prov 29:7, as an example.

<sup>34</sup> Jer 22:16.

word is much more descriptive, and defies attempts to spiritualise the word, so that it only means “sinner”, or to allow the word to merely identify the abject poor.<sup>35</sup> Both of these meanings are valid, but are only part of a more substantial understanding of who the poor are in the gospels. The New Testament continues to identify the poor as those who are economically and socially disadvantaged, however, “the poor” is also descriptive of believers,<sup>36</sup> and is often used as a synonym for the people of God.<sup>37</sup> The New Testament does not see a direct correlation between the poor and social class.

### **What Should the Biblical Concept of Justice Mean to a Church? The Need to Differentiate Between Justice and Charity**

There is an important question, which must be resolved, before a complete redefinition of our theology of justice and mission can take place. Is our concern, and subsequent response, a response of justice, or a response of charity? Doing justice, in a particular context, presupposes that what is being worked against is some form of injustice. Stanley Hauerwas contends that the current emphasis on justice and rights, as the primary norms guiding the social witness of Christians is a mistake.<sup>38</sup> All too easily, the church latches onto justice, as a means by which it might speak into the popular culture.<sup>39</sup>

The crux of the problem is that, as the church, we are easily influenced by the dominant culture, of which we are a part, when we formulate our concept of justice.<sup>40</sup> “Out of an understandable desire to be politically

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<sup>35</sup> The Christian church can be accused of spiritualising the term in passages such as Luke 4:18; 6:20; and 7:22, while certain liberation theologies have identified poor in these passages as the abject poor, who have been dispossessed, because of political or economic oppression.

<sup>36</sup> Jam 2:5-7.

<sup>37</sup> The poor widow of Luke 21:1-4 is an example of one who was materially poor, but who was also described as poor, because she demonstrated a piety, which was wholly dependent on God.

<sup>38</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, “The Politics of Justice”, in *After Christendom: How the Church is to Behave if Freedom, Justice, and a Christian Nation are a Bad Idea*, Homebush West NSW: Anzea, 1991, p. 46.

<sup>39</sup> Hauerwas, “The Politics of Justice”, p. 58.

<sup>40</sup> Douglas Hall argues, since the Constantinian era, the church has been captured by the dominant culture, and, to have a prophetic voice in the future, needs to undertake a deliberate disengagement from the culture, rework theology, so there might be an

and socially relevant, we lose the critical ability to stand against the limit of our social orders.”<sup>41</sup> Our societal view of justice is that justice is undertaken as a response to perceived wrongs, that is, the *prima facie* motive for justice is the need to grant equality of rights. I would argue this is a misinterpretation of the biblical concept of justice, as it is applied to the contemporary mission situation. Such an interpretation emerges from the creation of a dichotomy between the love of God and the justice of God, an interpretation which emerges whenever Christian ethics speak of justice, as a demand, which must be fulfilled, before we can speak of love.<sup>42</sup>

In the Christian context, justice is not only something we do, but it is something we are. Justice certainly involves seeking to ameliorate unjust social circumstances related to economics and social issues, however, Christian justice is predicated by love. Love and justice are not dichotomous, they are complimentary. Our calling in mission to all people, but especially to the poor, is first to love them, which means unconditionally accepting them. Wogaman says “Christian love . . . recognises, and acts on the basis of kinship – even when it does not feel like it.”<sup>43</sup>

Consequently, what might be done on behalf of a brother or sister, in the name of justice, may, in actual fact, be considered charity, an act of gracious love, demonstrated in a situation, where there is no obvious corollary of injustice.<sup>44</sup>

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appropriate reengagement. Douglas John Hall, *The End of Christendom and the Future of Christianity*, Valley Forge PA: Trinity Press, 1997, p. 43f. The thesis of this paper is very similar.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 68.

<sup>42</sup> J. Philip Wogaman, “Toward a Christian Definition of Justice”, in *Transformation* 7-2 (1990), p. 18.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>44</sup> One might be accused of splitting hairs in defining justice and charity in such a way. However, the fact remains our motivation for being people of justice is not primarily drawn from our societal understanding of justice, as giving people rights, which are due to them. It may be true that, in every case where justice is needed, there is an underlying injustice, however, Christian justice is born from love, not responsibility. The integrity of our Christian witness will only be maintained in the face of this type of application of justice.

### **3.2 Justice Means Restoration to Community**

Restoration to community was a key theme behind the Israelite Jubilee legislation. The community was to take those who were in danger of falling out of community, because of their economic distress. Justice is restoration to community, a restoration, which needs to be worked toward, and which must take place at two levels:

- (a) Community participation includes physical life itself, political protection, and decision making, social interchange, and standing, economic production, education, culture, and religion. Community membership means the ability to share fully, within one's capacity and potential, in each essential aspect of community.<sup>45</sup>
- (b) Incorporation into the community of God. At this point, we must deviate from the liberationist's concept of salvation, which sees salvation as liberation from economic and political oppression. Christian justice in mission, which degenerates into social action alone, is not a holistic conception of justice.<sup>46</sup> Justice entails restoration of the broken relationship with God, and inclusion, as a participant in the community of God.

### **Justice Requires a Redefinition of the Church's Ambience**

Many churches work hard at creating a family atmosphere, a task made easier, in many cases, by the fact that membership of many churches is defined according to clan, or family lines. Redefining the believer, as a member of the wider family of God, as a priority over membership of familial lines, clans, or cultural people groups, is an essential task of

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<sup>45</sup> Stephen Charles Mott, "The Partiality of Biblical Justice", in *Transformation* 10 (1993), p. 25. Also Wogaman, "Toward a Christian Definition of Justice", p.20, who argues that, as justice is defined by human faith, it means doing what is required to make it possible for everybody to belong in the community.

<sup>46</sup> An enormous amount of literature has been written on discussing the relationship between Christian outreach and Christian social action, authors, emphasising the priority of one over the other, frequently in response to the kind of kingdom-of-God model they are working with. For example, the priority of social action was given an enormous boost, as a response to the post-millennialist understanding of the kingdom, which looked toward an age of prosperity and well-being.

theology in Melanesian churches. In a culture, where family values are declining, a community, which is an oasis of traditional values, has an important ministry, however, there comes a point, where affirming this type of culture can become very exclusive and consequently unjust. While we are very quick to criticise the Pharisees for their exclusivism, unfortunately, honest self examination will reveal that many of us are not too far removed from the same self righteousness, when it comes to creating the type of ambience we are comfortable with in the life of the church. Exclusivism does not necessarily take place according to family lines, it can be affected, according to economic or social factors as well. Unfortunately, church members are often only open and friendly toward people they like, or to people who are like them, anyone who is too different may receive a subtle message that they are not welcome. The homogeneous unit principle can be subconsciously applied by a fellowship in its body life, so that people, who do not fit the mould, are, even unwittingly, excluded.

### **The Application of Biblical Justice Will Require a Radical Redefinition of Mission and Evangelism**

#### ***There is a Need for the Church to Revisit its Purpose for Existence***

If the church is to be genuine in its attempts to reach the lost, there needs to be a radical change in methodology,<sup>47</sup> as well as ambience. Where does justice fit into this? Is 61:1f indicates that justice is a foundational element in evangelism. Jesus quoted the same passage at the commencement of His own ministry.<sup>48</sup> Zorilla says, “One cannot really grasp the biblical message of evangelism without a mature understanding of justice. Evangelistic proclamation is the expression, and the result, of the grace of God. This is deeply rooted in His justice.”<sup>49</sup> A Christian community, which understands the meaning of justice, will be more interested in mission than maintenance.

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<sup>47</sup> Less emphasis on event related outreach and much more on relationally based evangelism.

<sup>48</sup> Luke 4:18-19.

<sup>49</sup> Hugo Zorilla, *The Good News of Justice: Share the Gospel: Live Justly*, Scottsdale PA: Herald Press, 1988, p. 35.

***There Needs to be a Deliberate Blurring of the Division Between Proclamation of the Gospel and Social Action***

Ronald J. Sider argues salvation is personal, communal, individual, and corporate.

We dare not reduce salvation to interpersonal transformation of relationships with the neighbour, because, right at the centre of salvation, is renewed relationship with God. We dare not reduce salvation to a personal relationship with God, in justification and sanctification, because, right at the heart of salvation, is the new redeemed community.<sup>50</sup>

Few can deny the link there is, throughout the New Testament, between mission and social justice. Jesus' summary of His own mission in Luke 4:18-19 makes this clear. Throughout His ministry, Jesus had special regard for the poor, affirming the practice of alms-giving in Matt 6:1-4, teaching about the need for concern for the neighbour, irrespective of ethnic background, in Luke 10:25-37, and teaching about humanitarianism in Matt 25:31-46. The theme of justice runs strongly through the Beatitudes. In Romans, Paul indicates one cannot be saved, nor have real peace with God, if one does not do justice, and practice love, through the power of the Holy Spirit. The implications of justice, at a social level, must not be ignored, in the context of mission and evangelism, nor should concerns for social justice be the only factor, which motivates mission and evangelism.

**Being People of Justice Impacts Worship in the Community**

A proper relationship with God is impossible where His people tolerate injustice.<sup>51</sup> The Psalms highlight that true worship can only exist when justice is being exercised. Worship, without justice, is perfunctory worship.

**The Development of a Fuller Doctrine of God and Humanity**

The development of a fuller doctrine of God means understanding God, as one who invades both the sacred and the secular. God is not a God

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<sup>50</sup> Ronald J. Sider, *One-Sided Christianity: Uniting the Church to Heal a Lost and Broken World*, Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 1993.

<sup>51</sup> Hos 12:5; 10:4; 11-18; Amos 2:6; 5:11; Is 5:23; Mic 6:5-8.

of the “gaps”. Understanding biblical justice requires us to recapture the truth of God as God of the nations, that is, of all people: the poor and the needy included. God’s concern for justice extends to all people.<sup>52</sup>

### **What Kind of Theological Reflection Needs to Take Place so that the Current Inadequacies in the Church are Addressed?**

Six specific needs were addressed above, but we need to consider the type of theological reflection necessary, so they might be realised. The reflection undertaken needs to recapture the relationship between the church and the kingdom of God, and the role the church has to play in the kingdom of God.

Historically, there has been some confusion as to what constitutes the kingdom of God, and what is the relationship between the church and the kingdom. Various scholars have argued the kingdom is non-eschatological,<sup>53</sup> thoroughly-eschatological,<sup>54</sup> fully-realised,<sup>55</sup> and eschatologically-inaugurated.<sup>56</sup> The Bible describes the kingdom as future, imminent, and present,<sup>57</sup> and so the best way of describing the present state of the kingdom seems to be that proposed by Ladd: inaugurated eschatology. The kingdom of God was inaugurated with the coming of Jesus, continues in the present age, and, at the return of Christ, will be consummated.

Unlike the situation that has developed in the past, the church must never identify itself as the kingdom of God. The church is a community of the kingdom, but never the kingdom itself.<sup>58</sup> Ladd

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<sup>52</sup> Amos 1:2; Nah 1:1-15.

<sup>53</sup> A. Harnack, and other 19th-century liberals.

<sup>54</sup> J. Weiss, A. Schweitzer, et al

<sup>55</sup> C. H. Dodd.

<sup>56</sup> J. Jeremias, G. E. Ladd.

<sup>57</sup> Future: Matt 6:10; 8:11-12; 13:24-30; 47-50; Mark 14:25. Imminent: Mark 1:14-15; 9:1; Luke 10:9; Matt 10:7. Present: Matt 11:28; 12:28; Luke 16:16; 17:20-21.

<sup>58</sup> George E. Ladd, *Jesus and the Kingdom*, Waco TX: Word Books, 1964, p. 258.

quotes H. D. Wendland: “The church is but the result of the coming of God’s kingdom into the world.”<sup>59</sup>

Howard Snyder argues a workable theology of the kingdom of God does a number of things, including the provision of a convincing account of the spiritual and physical dimensions of existence, a theology of the environment, an overall framework for affirming and understanding economics, politics, and social interaction, and a theology of Christian experience, which meets deep personal human needs, and yet is engaged with society and a global perspective.<sup>60</sup>

Subscribing to this kingdom framework has enormous implications for the missiological application of justice. The administration of justice is not to take place in some other time, rather, as the church participates in the reality of the kingdom, in this age, so justice is a present requirement.

Justice is found at the heart of the theology of the kingdom of God. The Old Testament expectation of the coming of the kingdom was an inbreaking of the righteousness of God establishing a new order (cf. Is 61:1ff). Jesus’ application of this text to His own work and ministry clearly indicates His understanding of the place of justice in the coming of the kingdom.

An unmistakable evidence of the coming of the kingdom is the proclamation of the gospel to the poor, not only in evangelistic effort (Matt 11:5b), but also as tangible physical evidences: the blind receiving sight, the lame walking, the lepers cured, and the dead raised. In the proclamation of the kingdom of God, the church is called on to be advocates of justice first, because, following the personal example of Jesus, necessitates this response, but also because Jesus clearly stated administration of justice was a necessary requirement for the true

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 261, quoting H. D. Wendland, *The Kingdom of God and History*, H. G. Wood, ed., London UK: G. Allen & Unwin, 1938, p. 188.

<sup>60</sup> Howard A. Snyder, *Models of the Kingdom*, Nashville TN: Abingdon Press, 1991, pp. 133-134. Snyder includes a number of other factors, which have been edited for brevity.

church. The parable of the sheep and the goats highlights the place social justice issues have as primary kingdom values.

The Beatitudes are, perhaps, the most comprehensive statements on the place of justice in the kingdom community. Although they are stated in the indicative, they contain implicit imperatives. As Jesus shared them, He did not do so simply wanting to reassure His followers of God's approval, but also to provoke certain ethical commitments from them. They speak very strongly about the position the Christian community should have on poverty, hunger, misery, and injustice, in the name of God's kingdom. "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness" may be a reference to a righteous standing before God, if understood according to the Pauline description of righteousness, but, in the context of Matthew, it refers to ethical conduct, which is coterminous with the will of God.<sup>61</sup>

The Beatitudes make a necessary link between justice and the present reality of the kingdom. Hungering and thirsting after righteousness is a present desire, a longing to see God's will done in human life, as He intended it. Furthermore, Jesus makes it clear that God's blessing falls upon those who have a passionate longing for justice in the present age, not only those who think it is a good idea.

A reflection on the presence of the kingdom of God in the present age means the church is to be the strongest advocate for justice, both within the church, and within the community. The proclamation of the kingdom, as a present reality, means the church must be prepared to practise the requirements of being part of the kingdom, to seek justice, in the social, political, and economic spheres of community. Proclamation of the kingdom of God, without an attendant focus on justice, will necessarily mean the proclamation of an incomplete gospel, or worse, a damagingly-syncretistic gospel, which only addresses a select facet of society.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Matt 5:10, 20; 6:1, 33 make clear the ethical and practical nature of the righteousness Matthew is referring to.

<sup>62</sup> This is perhaps the crux of the present problem. Material prosperity is by no means an accurate measure of the blessings.

## **Conclusion**

Throughout the latter parts of this paper, I have deliberately avoided giving a prescriptive list of things that need to be done to address the lack of focus on justice, which is evident in many evangelical churches. This has not been done to frustrate those of practical persuasion, but because the practical steps can only come as a result of theological reflection. Faithful proclamation of the present reality, and anticipated consummation of the kingdom, will necessarily mean justice is foundational to ministry. Anything less, is not a true understanding of the nature of the kingdom. A biblical theology of the kingdom of God can be applied to any church or ministry situation, not only the one addressed by this paper. The praxis of ministry must grow out of the theology, and foundational to the theology of the kingdom of God, is justice.

As has been demonstrated, the concept of justice is a broad and pervasive one. The affluent evangelical church needs to recapture the mandate to do justice, as a requirement of participation in the kingdom of God. The need to address this issue is an urgent one, for one of the inescapable questions at the final judgment will be, “How have we reacted to those in need of justice?”

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