

What is Social Justice? Trent Kennedy

Social justice is a moral, political, and spiritual philosophy, that is prevalent today. It has as its objective “creating a fair and equal society in which each individual matters, their rights are recognized and protected, and decisions are made in ways that are fair and honest.”¹ While this definition seems nice, realize that it does not identify who creates equality, who recognizes rights, or who makes the decisions. Researchers and professors might say that social justice implies “equality of the burdens, the advantages, and the opportunities of citizenship.”² Or, “social justice requires resource equity, fairness, and respect for diversity as well as the eradication of existing forms of social oppression” and a “decisive redistribution of resources.”³ But, social justice is not just a boring definition in scholarly journals or fancy dictionaries. It is embedded in American society, political discourse, popular culture, daily conversation, and frames religious thought. The Huffington Post has an entire section of their website dedicated to the topic, and the United Nations celebrates Social Justice Day in February each year.

Social justice is not new as a moral or political philosophy nor as a religious framework. However, the discussion of what social justice looks like today (as opposed to in the past) is much more profitable for understanding our times (1 Chron. 12:32), reaching the lost (Matt. 28:19-20), testing all things - including social media theologians (1 Thess. 5:21), keeping the church sound (Eph. 5:11, Titus 2:1), and fulfilling our God-given duties to our fellow man (Gal. 6:10, 1 John 4:12).⁴

Divergence

Social justice today seeks to enrich the poor, empower (what they call) neglected communities, and give a voice to those who (in their estimation) have been ignored. It seeks judicial reform, political power, environmental activism, economic reform (often through a redistribution of wealth), giving women power over human babies growing inside of them, LGBTQ+ awareness and activism, and a certain level of “wokeness.” The basic premise of social justice is in the idea of an equality of outcomes rooted in perceived fairness for the common good.

Here, there is a desire, not for the equality of opportunity, but to live your life however you want, work in your job, or not, with whatever effort and hours you choose, treat others

¹ Oxford dictionary online.

² G.J. Papageorgiou of McMaster University in an article “Social Values and Social Justice,” 1980. I don’t love definitions, but carefully defined terms allow us to communicate the same language. Also, it was the assigned topic.

³ Joe Feagin (former U.T. Austin professor and current Texas A&M professor who was the president of American Sociological Association) in an article called “Social Justice and Sociology: Agendas for the Twenty First Century.”

⁴ If you are interested in the history of social justice as a philosophy John Rawls (1970s even until today) is a good place to start. He was also a leading voice of post modernism. In religion you can look into works by William Rauschenbusch (many works around early 1900s) or more recently Obrey Hendricks book *The Politics of Jesus: Rediscovering the True Revolutionary Nature of Jesus’ Teachings and How They Have Been Corrupted*.

with dignity or contempt, and make whatever choice you deem best for yourself without the responsibility to enjoy or suffer the full consequences of your actions. Instead, social justice seeks to share the burdens and blessings of society. This correcting of wrongs or ills is done through the process of redistribution of burden and blessings; not by individual choosing but by force. When these aims are cloaked in gospel language, then there is an implication that Christians have a moral duty to submit to a spiritual, moral, and political philosophy geared toward social justice. If you dare to oppose, this opposition is painted as anti-equality, anti-compassion, and anti-common good. As a political philosophy it has merits which should be debated within those political and philosophical contexts. However, the divergence comes when this worldly philosophy is pushed onto Christians today in Bible terms, projected into the lives of Biblical heroes, and forced in eisegesis upon the Scriptures.

As a religious philosophy a leading denominational group may best sum it up: “God’s vision for transformation is rooted in justice, peace and liberation. We can change the world through collective action against unjust policies, practices, and systems and organizing.”⁵

This type of philosophy needs a leader that teaches it, and there are many who are willing to frame Jesus in just such a light:

“Jesus came to an oppressed people who were in bondage to Gentiles, exploited by the Roman government and policed by the Roman army. As the Messiah, he came to offer people a way of organizing against their oppression, by banding together and becoming a nation.”⁶

When the religious philosophy or theology concludes that Jesus’ work was primarily community organizing, Christians are left with some serious choices.

Dilema

If I reject social justice, do I hate my fellow man? If I accept it and base my faith in it, am I trading a savior for a something much less? In short, no and yes. If you reject social justice it does not mean you hate your fellow man. But, if you tie your faith to this thinking, you will have certainly belittled the King of kings. Should the church care about societal ills, injustice, imbalance, mistreatment, mischaracterization, and inequality? Should the church focus on righting societal wrongs? Must the church stand in the gap left by government and others to push political outcomes that distribute funds the poor, house the homeless, increase free medical care, alter the environment, hold corporations and politicians accountable and the like? Or, can the church be aware of the world, the ills and injustices of society while still holding that God’s plan to save mankind did not and does not focus on righting societal “wrongs”?

Jesus’ primary focus on this earth was not to right social wrongs but to offer the prospect of righting spiritual wrongs (Luke 19:10). He did not come to enable utopia on earth but to prepare a place in Heaven (John 14:1-4). He did not come to protest peacefully but to make peace between God and man by the blood of His cross (Rom. 5:1, Col. 1:20). There should be no apology for teaching these things. Doing good is good, but it is not the main thing of

⁵ The United Methodist Church has an entire webpage committed to social justice (www.umcjustice.org) where they detail current social issues. The quote above is from www.umcjustice.org/what-you-can-do/grassroots-organizing.

⁶ “Jesus Christ: The Greatest Community Organizer of All Time.” By Staff. www.blackyouthproject.com.

the church. Even while preachers and authors within the brotherhood want us to focus more on social issues, we can never make these issues the primary message of the gospel because Jesus never did.

Most proponents of social justice believe that a seen hand, usually the state, must move to correct the ills or wrongs of this life.⁷ When blended with a belief that the gospel's message is primarily concerned with righting the wrongs of this world, then the state becomes the purveyor of religious retribution. Both of these conclusions are wrong. First, the primary purpose of the gospel is not righting the wrongs in this decaying world (Heb. 1:10-12). The power of the gospel is not meant to be focused on environmental activism or even immigration policy. The purpose of the gospel, the eternal purpose of Jesus coming to this earth, was and is for the salvation of men's (used in the general sense of to denote men and women, mankind, or humankind) souls to the glory of God. Second, the state is not the avenger of spiritual problems; God is. And, this point reaches beyond the discussion of social justice, but the state is not tasked with the duties assigned by God to the church nor to the individual Christian. The state has a role and that role is defined, examined, and expected by the sovereign God (Rom. 13:1-7, 1 Pet. 2:13-17).

Direction

Where do we go from here? Social justice as a religious philosophy that makes Jesus a radical revolutionary who is primarily concerned with organizing the community to reject the status quo and liberating those who have suffered by the hand of the government or the rich or the whatever, completely misses the point of the gospel message. Through the preaching of the gospel, the apostle Paul made many rich without ever putting a dollar in their pocket (2 Cor. 6:10).

The gospel is a message of riches and inheritance (2 Cor. 8:9, 1 Pet. 1:3-5), but not of physical riches (Matt. 6:19-21, Jas. 1:9-10). It is a message of power (Rom. 1:16) even empowering us individually (Eph. 3:20), but it is not a message of political power (Matt. 20:25-28). The gospel gives a voice to the unheard, a purpose to the meandering, a place at the table for the neglected, and much, much more. But, the gospel does not give that power through the state nor even guarantee these things in this life. Instead, God calls us to focus on the hope that we have in Heaven with Him.

So, should the church just ignore the wrongs in society or the mistreatment of others? God forbid. We cannot ignore people who are created in the image of God and worth the life of His Son. Within a Biblical framework (understanding that Jesus is much more than a community organizer), Christians are called upon to feed the hungry (Matt. 25:35), look to the needs of others (1 John 3:17), visit the imprisoned (Matt. 25:36), tend to the needs of vulnerable in society (Jas. 1:27), cloth the naked (Matt. 25:36), seek peace with others (Heb. 12:4), love our enemies (Matt. 5:44), do good to those who mistreat us (Rom. 12:20-21), encourage the weak (1 Thess. 5:14), and take the gospel to a lost and dying world (Mark 16:15). A man can have a full belly, new shoes, the right to vote, and money in his pocket all while being dead in his sins. Even while observing and working to personally correct societal ills, we cannot mistake these temporal problems to be of greater significance than eternal problems. The church and each Christian must put the first thing first.

⁷ Some thoughts from Michael Novak's great article on heritage.org entitled "Social Justice: Not What You Think It Is."