

The Injustice of Social Justice

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The besetting sin of pragmatic, style-conscious evangelicals has always been that they shamelessly borrow fads and talking points from the unbelieving world. Today's evangelicals evidently don't believe the wisdom of this world is foolishness before God (1 Corinthians 3:19). Virtually any theory, ideology, or amusement that captures the fancy of secular pop culture will be adopted, slightly adapted, perhaps cloaked in spiritual-sounding language, propped up with specious proof texts, and peddled as an issue that is vital for evangelicals to embrace if we don't want to become totally irrelevant.

That's precisely how evangelicals in the mid-twentieth century became obsessed for several decades with positive thinking, self-esteem, and "Christian psychology." After that, it was marketing savvy and promotional strategies. By the beginning of the twenty-first century it was postmodernism, repackaged and aggressively promoting itself as the Emerging Church movement.

Today, critical race theory, feminism, intersectional theory, LGBT advocacy, progressive immigration policies, animal rights, and other left-wing political causes are all actively vying for evangelical acceptance under the rubric of "social justice."

Not every evangelical leader currently talking about social justice supports the full spectrum of radical causes, of course. Most (for the moment, at least) do not. But they are using the same rhetoric and rationale of victimhood and oppression that is relentlessly employed by secularists who are aggressively advocating for all kinds of deviant lifestyles and ideologies. Anyone who claims victim status can easily and effectually harness the emotional appeal of a plea for "social justice" both to gain support and to silence opposition.

Indeed, as social justice rhetoric has gained currency among evangelicals, just about every cause that is deemed politically correct in the secular world *is* steadily gaining momentum among evangelicals. It would be folly to pretend the social justice movement poses no threat whatsoever to evangelical conviction.

Evangelicals seldom explicitly define what *they* mean by "social justice"—possibly because if they gave an accurate definition of where that term came from and what it means in the secular academy, they might lose a lot of evangelical support. Countless critics have pointed out that the rhetoric of "social justice" is deeply rooted in Gramscian Marxism. For many decades, "social justice" has been employed as political shorthand by radical leftists as a way of calling for equal distribution of wealth, advantages, privileges, and benefits—up to and including pure Marxist socialism.

The rhetoric has been effective, and nowadays the typical social justice warrior is convinced that equal opportunity and equal treatment under the law are not sufficiently just; we haven't achieved *true* social justice until we have equality of outcome, status, and wealth. That's why we hear so much about income comparisons, racial quotas, and other statistics suggesting, for example, that systemic oppression by a male oligarchy is conclusively proved by the dearth of women who pursue careers in

STEM fields (science, technology, engineering, and math).

Marxists, socialists, anarchists, and other radicals purposely use such arguments to foment resentment, class warfare, ethnic strife, tension between the genders, and other conflicts between various people groups, because in order to restructure society to fit their ideologies, they must first break down existing societal norms.

All of that is true, and the connection between Marxism and postmodern social justice rhetoric is surely a valid and important point. But it is even more vital that we as Christians employ the light of Scripture to scrutinize and evaluate the ideas currently being promoted in the name of social justice.

No Justice but God's Justice

The Bible has much to say about *justice*. In the English Standard Version of the Bible, the word is used more than 130 times. It is never preceded by an adjective, except in Ezekiel 18:8, which speaks of “true justice.” It is occasionally paired with possessive pronouns. God Himself speaks of “my justice” twice in Scripture. Twice in prayers addressed to God, we read the expression “your justice.”

The point? *There are not different flavors of justice*. There is only *true* justice, defined by God Himself and always in accord with His character.

It is a fact that the Bible puts enormous stress on the charitable aspects of justice—goodwill toward all; compassion for the underprivileged; assistance for the fatherless and the widow; love for foreigners; and care for the poor, especially providing needy people with the necessities of life (Deuteronomy 10:18; Psalm 140:12; Ezekiel 22:29).

But biblical justice is not a one-sided affair, showing partiality to the poor or disenfranchised in an effort to even the scales of privilege. In fact, Scripture expressly condemns that mentality as *unjust* (Exodus 23:3; Leviticus 19:15).

Justice in Scripture is often paired with the words *equity* and *righteousness*. *Equity* means equal treatment for everyone under the law. *Righteousness* signifies that which is consistent with the demands of God's law—including punishment for evildoers (Jeremiah 5:26-29); obedience to governing authorities (Romans 13:1-7); penalties that fit the crime and are applied without partiality (Leviticus 24:17-22); and a strong work ethic, enforced by the principle that able-bodied people who refuse to work shouldn't benefit from public charity (1 Thessalonians 4:11; 2 Thessalonians 3:10).

Those aspects of true justice are conspicuously missing from the recent evangelical dialogue touting “social justice.” Instead, what we hear is an echo of the same accusatory rhetoric and political slogans being shouted by secular social justice warriors. That fact *ought* to awaken the Berean urge in every Christian.

Widening the Gospel

Even more troubling are statements that have been made by certain evangelical thought leaders who claim that anyone who doesn't advocate for social justice is preaching a truncated gospel. Some say

that those who reject their social justice ideology don't have any gospel at all. Anthony Bradley, Chair of Religious and Theological Studies at The King's College, recently posted this [remark online](#):

Here's the problem (and this will be hard): from a black church perspective, evangelicals have never had the gospel. Ever. Read the book *Doctrine A[nd] Race*. Here then is the actual Q: When will evangelicals embrace the gospel for the first time ever?

Those who say such things typically bristle when critics compare their views to Walter Rauschenbusch and the social gospel. But the argument and most of the rhetoric are identical. Rauschenbusch was an early twentieth-century liberal theologian and author of a book titled *A Theology for the Social Gospel*. He taught that Christians need to repent not only for their personal transgressions but also for "social sins." Like most of today's evangelical social justice advocates, Rauschenbusch insisted (at first) that he had no agenda to do away with any vital gospel truth; he just wanted to widen the focus of the gospel so that it would encompass social evils as well as the issue of individual sin and redemption. But soon Rauschenbusch was saying things like this:

Public evils so pervade the social life of humanity in all times and all places that no one can share the common life of our race without coming under the effect of these collective sins. He will either sin by consenting in them, or he will suffer by resisting them. *Jesus did not in any real sense bear the sin of some ancient Briton who beat up his wife in B.C. 56, or of some mountaineer in Tennessee who got drunk in A.D. 1917. But he did in a very real sense bear the weight of the public sins of organized society, and they in turn are causally connected with all private sins.* [1] Walter Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (New York: MacMillan, 1917), 247 (italics added).

Several of America's largest mainstream Protestant denominations eagerly imbibed Rauschenbusch's ideas. All that did quickly drifted even further into liberalism until they had abandoned any commitment they might have had to the authority of Scripture. By then they had long since lost the gospel completely.

Why? Because those who let the culture, a political ideology, popular opinion, or any other extrabiblical source define "justice" for them will soon find that Scripture opposes them. If they are determined to retain their perverted idea of justice, they will therefore have to oppose Scripture.

Furthermore, every attempt to widen the scope of the gospel will ultimately put the gospel so far *out* of focus that its actual message will be lost.

The message of social justice diverts attention from Christ and the cross. It turns our hearts and minds from things above to things on this earth. It obscures the promise of forgiveness for hopeless sinners by telling people they are hapless victims of other people's misdeeds.

It therefore fosters the works of the flesh instead of cultivating the fruit of the Spirit.

Let Us Not Provoke One Another or Envy One Another

Christians are the last people who should ever become offended, resentful, envious, or unforgiving. Love "does not take into account a wrong suffered" (1 Corinthians 13:5). The mark of a Christian is turning the other cheek, loving our enemies, praying for those who mistreat us. Christ is the example

whose steps we are to follow: “While being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously” (1 Peter 2:23).

Hatred, envy, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, hostility, divisiveness, bitterness, pride, selfishness, hard feelings, vindictiveness—and all similar attitudes of resentment—are the self-destructive works of the flesh. The beneficial fruit the Spirit produces are the exact opposite attitudes: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.” The NIV translates 1 Corinthians 13:5 this way: “[Love] keeps no record of wrongs.”

Such qualities, frankly, are in short supply in the rhetoric of those advocating for social justice.

Doing justice (i.e., *biblical* justice, not the secular substitute) together with loving mercy and walking humbly with God are all essential virtues. Those are the chief practical duties incumbent on every believer (Micah 6:8). Constantly complaining that we are victims of injustice while judging other people guilty of sins we cannot even see is antithetical to the Spirit of Christ.

As Christians, let’s cultivate the fruit of the Spirit, the qualities named in the Beatitudes, the virtues outlined in 2 Peter 1:5-7, and the characteristics of love listed in 1 Corinthians 13. Any notion of moral equity that omits or minimizes those righteous qualities has no right whatsoever to be called “justice.”



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