

Theology of Social Justice – Part 1

A Common Good Position Paper

1. Introduction

Common Ground Church is a gospel community that seeks to fill our city with the message, life and fame of Jesus. We do this through planting and strengthening churches and equipping people to excel in: evangelism, discipleship, community building, social justice and societal renewal.

As we see the gospel move deeper and wider in our city (especially in communities where poverty and injustice are rampant), our leaders will need to have a firm understanding of this theology and the practical implications. In addition to this, social justice is one of the big 5 emphases for the people we lead.

It is a highly nuanced topic and care has been taken to bring clarity for our leaders to lead well in this important area of our Christian faith.

This paper covers the following topics:

- Gods heart for poverty and injustice
- A biblical understanding of 'doing justice'
- The motivation to do justice
- Essential thinking
- One mission – different functions
- Understanding Common Good
- Conclusion

2. God's heart for poverty and injustice

God sees affliction: "But you, God, see the trouble of the afflicted; you consider their grief and take it in hand. The victims commit themselves to you; you are the helper of the fatherless" Psalm 10:14

God is for the poor: "He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap, he seats them with princes, with the princes of his people". Psalm 113:7-8

God answers the poor: "The poor and needy search for water, but there is none; their tongues are parched with thirst. But I the Lord will answer them; I, the God of Israel, will not forsake them" Isaiah 41:17

He strengthens the weak: "I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak" Ezekiel 24:16

He is a God of justice: “[The Lord] executes justice for the oppressed, and gives food to the hungry. The LORD sets the prisoners free; the LORD opens the eyes of the blind. The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down; the LORD loves the righteous. The LORD watches over the sojourners; he upholds the widow and the fatherless, but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.” Psalm 146:7-9

3. What does it mean to “do justice”?

“And what does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God?” Micah 6:8

What does it mean to “Do justice and love mercy”? The Hebrew term for justice is *mishpat* and for mercy is *chesedh*. When we scratch a little deeper, we see that *mishpat* is ‘justice’, the emphasis on action – on doing something – on treating people equally. It means to treat others without favouritism, without prejudice. Simply put, it means that people get what they deserve – whether protection, punishment or care. *Chesedh*, however, focuses more on ‘attitude’. It speaks to having the correct view of people – to not view them differently based on their social standing, income or influence.

We get more insight into the Biblical concept of justice when we look at the Hebrew word *tzadeqah*. It can be translated as ‘being just’, although it is often translated as ‘being righteous’. It refers to a life of right relationships. Drawing these themes together, it is pointing to the idea that the ‘righteous’ life is not merely defined by private morality or actions, but inherently includes the way in which one relates to others.

The words *tzadeqah* and *mishpat* go together in that *tzadeqah* is ‘primary justice’. If people were living and relating according to *tzadeqah*, there would be no need for *misphat*, or the punishment of wrongdoers and caring for the victims. Reference Job 29:13-17 to see how these two terms complement each other.

Justice means that people get what they deserve – as image bearers of God. In a highly divided city like Cape Town, that includes taking a proactive role (*mishpat*), building right relationships (*tzadeqah*) with an attitude that is honouring and uplifting to all (*chesedh*).

4. The motivation to do justice

To do justice means not merely being innocent of perpetrating injustice, but includes actively working towards restoration in areas in which injustice has happened:

“Open your mouth for the mute, for the rights of all who are destitute. Open your mouth, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy”. Prov31:8-9

“Thus says the LORD: Do justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor him who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the resident alien, the fatherless, and the widow, nor shed innocent blood in this place”. Jeremiah 22:3

It reflects the character of God

Doing social justice is a reflection of the character of God. God is a God of justice. (see Psalm 10, 113, 146, Isaiah 41 and Eze 24) It is part of who he is. If God is a God of love, mercy and justice, with a heart for the poor, then God’s people should be a reflection of those qualities. To allow injustice to continue is a deep affront to God and his character. Jesus’ bride is to be offended by the same things that he is offended by.

God identifies with the poor. When Jesus incarnated, He lived a life of material poverty. If we write the poor off, we write God off. He does not show favouritism, but does claim to be the defender of the poor (and never claims to be the defender of the rich.)

It is a natural expression of the deepening of the gospel in a believer’s life

The transformation of someone through the acceptance of the Gospel is wide reaching – changing who they are, what they do and how they think. As the Gospel goes deeper into people’s lives, their attitude and response to issues of social justice naturally changes. Tim Keller states that a true experience of the grace of Jesus Christ inevitably motivates a man or woman to seek justice in the world. In this way, we see mercy as being a thermometer of our understanding of God’s grace and gospel. “If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person?” (1 John 3:17). See also Luke 6:33. Isaiah 58 is a cry of judgment against people who claimed to be believers but their ‘faith’ did not lead to pursuing justice.

Responding in mercy to human needs is an essential mark of being a Christian. A life poured out in deeds of mercy is a sign of true faith - an inevitable expression of faith. For a life whose roots are in the gospel, the fruit displayed will include that of a personal response to social justice.

We do deeds of mercy because they are a fruit of the Spirit’s work in us. The gospel calls us to obey and not merely believe, but our response is not from a heart of love (1 John 5:2-3), not obligation.

If you look down on the poor, staying distant from their pain and suffering, then you have not truly understood or experienced God’s grace. James 2:17 illustrates that “Faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead”.

The nature of the gospel is that it is not something that happens to you and stays there. It always has to affect somebody or something else. We are blessed to bless others, redeemed to show redemptive grace, loved to love others and so on. This redeemed life finds its expression in all spheres of life, including journeying with the poor and marginalised.

It is a biblical command to love your neighbour

“You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Matthew 22:39

Jesus’ clear commandment to us is that we love our neighbours as we would love ourselves. This is a simple commandment, made complex by the questions of a) Who is my neighbour in such a divided city? And b) how do I love my neighbour?

A summary of Leviticus 19:9-18 shows us how we can love our neighbours as ourselves:

- love others with possessions 9-10
- love others with words 11-12
- love others by our actions 13-14
- love others in our judgments 15-16
- love others in our attitude 17-18

A natural outcome of people individually and collectively loving their neighbours as themselves is in Deuteronomy 15:4,7,8 “there will be no poor among you... If among you, one of your brothers should become poor, in any of your towns within your land that the LORD your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart or shut your hand against your poor brother, but you shall open your hand to him and lend him sufficient for his need, whatever it may be”. When we remain open-hearted to our ‘poor brothers’, the natural response is to open our hands to them.

Old Testament prophecies and rebukes are commonly directed at Israel’s lack of love for the poor. They perpetrated injustice: cheating, oppressing, accepting bribes, land grabs, and giving unfair judgments (Isaiah 1; 58; Jeremiah 22; Ezekiel 16; Micah 6). Measures were put in place to protect the weakest from these injustices, allowing for gleaning of crops for the poor, Jubilee cancellation of debts and restoration of land allotments, so that generational poverty was not possible (Leviticus 25). Other laws ensured that there should not be groups of people in permanent poverty. Whilst these laws are difficult to literally apply in our current economic system, we can learn from the principles: have systems that mitigate the impact of poverty and eliminate any system that allows for families living in perpetual poverty - one poor generation inevitably giving rise to another.

Loving ones neighbour is more than simply refraining from evil. It involves actively seeking ways to help the weak, to address injustice and to journey with those who are marginalised. This encompasses the nature of Christians to be servants of others. Jesus modelled service in a way that elevated it as part of who he is and we should be. “But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.” 1 John 3:17-18.

Every person bears the image of God

Our view of people informs our treatment of them. To truly love others 'as ourselves', we must be ready and willing to raise our view of others. Our sinful nature leads us to feel intrinsically better and more deserving than other people. Through a biblical understanding of humanity, we are able to see people as equals, or as better than ourselves (Philippians 2:3). We do not work to serve people because of what they could become, but because of their worth as image-bearers of God.

The parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-27) demonstrates that our neighbour is not limited to those people with whom we already have a relationship. Our neighbours include any and every person that God brings across our path. This includes people outside of our local congregation, church, community and city and regardless of their view of Christ and even includes our enemies.

This highlights the prejudice we may have in our hearts towards certain classes or groups of people. Believing and knowing that they bear the image of God should stir us to action to address injustice or oppression, not because we like them, but because they bear the same image of God that we do. Every person has the right to not be mistreated or harmed.

We are to seek the shalom of the city

Jeremiah encouraged the exiles in Babylon to seek the shalom (peace or prosperity) of Babylon: "But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare." Jeremiah 29:7. As Christ-followers on this earth, we are to seek the shalom of the city in which we are placed.

In Cape Town where God has placed Common Ground, our context demands active working for the shalom of the city. It will not happen by accident or neglect.

Christ-followers are salt and light

Our lives, our mission and everything we do should be for God's praise, fame and honour. Certain things we do for His glory, however, have a public element which can generate interest in things of faith. An essential part of what it means to be a Christian is to live holy, 'set apart' lives. This includes not participating in things that perpetuate injustices as well as taking steps to actively redress injustices. Our lives make the teaching about God our saviour attractive, as signposts to ultimate liberation (Titus 2:10 and 1 Peter 2:12-3:17).

Individual and collective responses to issues of social justice are visible demonstrations of the good news. Jesus' statement that his followers are the salt of the earth (Matt 5:13) indicates a function of being a preservative in a decaying world. This motivates us to participate through various avenues to either create or preserve Biblical values in our broken society.

Jesus' statement that his followers are the lights of the world (Matt 5:14) speaks to a lifestyle that is attractive to those who are in the darkness. As we respond to issues of social justice, our lives

may indeed motivate the curiosity of others and allow for a sharing of the good news. To be moved by compassion, justice and generosity in a dark, decaying world of cruelty, exploitation and greed is counter cultural. This makes the Christian life stand apart.

Tim Keller tells the story of Julian, the Roman emperor of the fourth century. Wanting to restore pagan religions in the Roman empire, he was finding resistance because of the spread of Christianity. Julian hated Christians, but he recognised they were gaining new converts because of their generosity to the poor. We read of a letter to a pagan priest in which we read of how the life and work of Christians was both salt and light during that time “Nothing has contributed to the progress of the superstition of the Christians as their charity to strangers... the impious Galileans provide not only for their own poor, but for ours as well” (Ministries of Mercy: 87)

To take the social demands of the city seriously is one way to demonstrate the good news of the gospel. We carry both a message (proclamation) and lives changed by this message (demonstration). It is insufficient for the gospel to be heard only, its life-changing power must be seen as well. A response to social justice is a display that attracts others to explore the claims of Christ.

We are stewards of our time, talents and treasure

A Christ follower engages in addressing issues of social justice because it is pleasing and honouring to God. Pleasing and honouring God is a delight to a Christ follower in and of itself.

Stewardship of people’s time and resources is a big component of motivating people’s response. A recognition that all that one has in his/her possession or position – whether the work of one hands, whether it is more or less than others – all of it belongs to God. David recognised this in 1 Chronicles 29:11 : “Yours, O LORD, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the victory and the majesty, *for all that is in the heavens and in the earth is yours*. Yours is the kingdom, O LORD, and you are exalted as head above all.” Emphasis mine.

For this reason, each person will be held to account by God as to how they managed their wealth – whether much or little. A lack of generosity is an indication that you do not see your possessions as being God’s. Lack of proper use of your resources, therefore, is not stinginess, but injustice. We have freely received by grace, our attitude should be one of freely giving.

If you are kind to the poor, you honour God. If you are treating the poor badly, you insult God: “Whoever oppresses a poor man insults his Maker, but he who is generous to the needy honors him,” Proverbs 14:31. If we are generous, we must do so with joy, honestly and freely.

In conclusion, the reasons for responding individually and collectively to issues of social injustice are varied and demonstrate that there is no reasonable justification for non-involvement. Any believer who takes seriously the claims and teachings of Christ and his Bible will recognise the

importance of proactively responding to those who have less than they do, are across a divide, or who are victims of social injustice.

5. Essential thinking:

Poverty

The definition of poverty will shape the way one responds to it. It is more complex than a Rand-per-day type of definition. A better view is to see poverty as broken relationships. "Poverty is a result of relationships that do not work, that are not just, that are not for life, that are not harmonious or enjoyable. Poverty is the absence of shalom in all its meanings." Myers 1999:86. These broken relationships exist in relating to the community, to the environment, to others, to oneself and to God.

Biblically, there are 3 causes to poverty – that drag people into poverty and work to keep them there:

Oppression (exploitation by those who have power) – any social condition or unfair treatment that causes someone to enter poverty or stay in poverty. Unfair or delayed wages, unjust systems that favour the rich and high interest loans are in this category (Psalm 82; Prov 14:31; Exo 22:21-27; Deut 24:15; Lev 19:15)

Calamity (events beyond one's control) – this is poverty caused by natural disaster. Floods, fires, droughts, victims of crime, disablement and storms are examples. Read Leviticus 25 for some implications.

Personal sin (attitudes and behaviours within one's control) – poverty might be caused by lack of self-discipline and laziness (Prov 6:6-11; Prov 23:21; Prov 21:17)

The root cause of someone's material poverty is often indistinguishable and there is most often an overlap between these three causes. The cause of poverty does not change the call for Christ-followers to respond. It does, however, change the *way* in which we respond. See the next point as to the best way in which to respond.

If one identifies the cause as personal sin, this does not release the believer from providing care and support. (After all, if Jesus died whilst we were still sinners, we can journey responsibly with people who are in poverty because of their own personal sin.)

Poverty and injustice are linked, but different. Poverty does not inherently imply injustice. Poverty can happen to anyone. There are the righteous poor and the unrighteous poor. There are also the righteous rich and the unrighteous rich.

Whilst injustice can happen to anyone, the poor and marginalised are the ones who are disproportionately affected by it and are more prone to remaining in ongoing poverty. For example, Amos 5 warns Israel of how their treatment (injustice) of the needy (those in poverty) will lead to dire consequences collectively.

Stages of development

There are three types of responses to injustice or poverty, each of which good in the right situation. Discernment as to God's direction in the face of opportunities to do good, as well as considering community development practices will shape which response is best:

Relief: Giving material resources to people in need – whether clothes, food, accommodation etc. This typically is best suited to disasters situations.

Rehabilitation: Walking a journey with an individual or small group of people to restore them to contributing members of society. Skills training courses, literacy development and other programmes fit into this category.

Development and reform: This addresses the bigger picture factors that trap people in poverty or injustice. Advocacy, policy changes, government engagement, empowering the community to help itself are examples of this.

The call to action in a particular church needs to weigh up what the most loving response is in each situation. The range of formalised responses by a church is massive. Discern, consult and plan to build long lasting good.

We are transformed as we pursue justice

God is working to transform his followers into the image of his Son. As Christ-followers pursue justice, in serving those who are materially poor, they typically find themselves being challenged in their faith. This is at the heart of transformational development: we need God's redemptive power as much as those we are serving. We both need to recover our identity as children of God, made in his image. This helps us to be humble – that we do not 'play god' to be the saviour who are financially poor.

God uses experiences of encountering and serving the materially poor to transform our hearts from being consumers to being those who are on mission. Facing poverty often confronts our selfish patterns of living and draws us to living more for others. We have not 'arrived', and God will continue to work on our character even as we try to reach others with his hope.

The relationship between evangelism and social responsibility

a) **We believe that evangelism and social responsibility are complementary.**

John Stott states it, "For the gospel is the root, of which both evangelism and social responsibility are the fruit". Said another way, the gospel is the root, and both gospel-proclamation (evangelism) as well as gospel-demonstration (loving one's neighbours) are the fruit. Knowing that both these core elements of the Christian faith are rooted in the gospel frames them as being complementary and in not competition with each other.

We need to do both. The Micah declaration states it as follows: "If we ignore the world we betray the world of God which sends us out to serve the world. If we ignore the word of God we have

nothing to bring the world". There is a difference between word and deed. One should never confuse the two. Christians are able to do both. An examination of Jesus' ministry shows that sometimes he started with addressing physical needs and other times he started with addressing spiritual needs. He did not ignore either.

Doing justice is not a distraction to evangelism and is not inherently a part of evangelism. The challenge in Cape Town is that division has brought a separation of classes and races. We tend to see evangelism is for those people who are like us, whilst social justice is for people who are not like us, creating a false dichotomy. If we saw marginalised people as our friends, the balance of both evangelism and seeking justice would become clearer. Drawing false dichotomy between doing justice and evangelism or irreversibly joining them together renders the beautiful, dynamic gospel into a formula to be manipulated. Each situation requires prayerful scrutiny and may lead with one element over the other in journeying with people towards Christ.

b) We believe that it is not enough to do social responsibility while neglecting evangelism.

The gospel is reconciliation between man and God. At no point in the Bible is reconciliation between humans called the gospel. In other words, activities or work to reconcile man to man is not the gospel. It is clear, therefore, that doing justice is not equal to the gospel. The gospel is far broader than that.

The spiritual is not more important than the physical, but the eternal is more important than the temporal. If we are to love our neighbour, the most loving thing we can do is to introduce them to Christ. This involves some form of verbal preaching of the gospel. An examination of first world countries demonstrates that flourishing does not necessarily lead to a relationship with Christ. Whilst we cannot and should not ignore the physical realities of people we reach out to, bringing them to a level of earthly flourishing does not mean they are reconciled to God.

When considering actions of addressing social justice, evangelism is the single unique thing that Christians can offer this world. Any humanitarian organisation can work for the betterment or flourishing of individuals or cities. Christians, however, have evangelism as the most basic and radical ministry. Romans 10:13-17 shows the primacy of the proclaimed word of Christ: "For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!" But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, "Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?" So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ." This is balanced by James: "15 Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. 16 If one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? 17 In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead" James 2:15-17.

c) We believe social responsibility increases our evangelistic impact

Word and deed (proclamation and demonstration) are not mutually exclusive. Doing justice lays a foundation for people to for evangelism, as it provides something visible to see. They are mutually interdependent. Whilst doing justice does not 'improve' the gospel message, it does help to make it more visible. For this reason, doing justice must be done outside of the walls of the church. Serving, caring and loving believers in need in the church is essential, but if we only look inwards, our message will not be heard outwards. If the church exists strictly for itself, the teaching and preaching will not resonate with outsiders. Truth, when argued, is powerful and even more powerful when demonstrated. If our neighbours see Christians loving their neighbours in counter-cultural, sacrificial ways, they will be more open to the church's message.

d) We believe that the gospel changes people, and energizes in them a life of service of others.

If one wants to see true change in individuals, then the gospel is necessary. If you want to see a changed society, you need changed people. For this reason, evangelism is the major instrument of social change. It is important to recognise that salvation is not the solution for social issues. It precedes it and makes it a possibility. Christianity starts with faith in Christ and finishes with services in the world – including those in the pockets of pain in the city. Responding to issues of social justice is a natural expression of the gospel penetrating your heart. You will feel compelled to do works of justice whether or not the person becomes a believer or not. The issue lies more with how the balance is struck in formal programmes and activities to which Christians are called by the church leaders. To fail to do justice is simply a lack of love. To want to share the gospel with a person in need without seeking to find ways to address their painful physical situation will fail to show them the essence of Christ's character. To fail to share the gospel with someone is simply a lack of love. To work towards their earthly flourishing without seeking to reconcile them to God for eternal flourishing will fail to introduce them to the saving work of Christ.

The connection between doing justice and mission

Knowing how doing justice and evangelism are linked, we say that pursuing gospel-centred justice is an expression of mission. It is unhelpful to narrow mission as being only personal evangelism of those in your relational sphere. Instead, we believe that pursuing gospel-centred justice is part of mission. They are not mutually exclusive or in tension with each other.

When justice is pursued in a corporate, gathered setting in another community, there exists the opportunity for it becoming a gospel frontier. As people encounter the gospel, are saved and community is formed, there exists the opportunity for small groups to be formed. Similarly, this allows for fertile ground for church planting in new communities. Whilst this is not inevitable, the opportunities exist for the furtherance of the mission of the church.

In terms of the individuals pursuing justice with those people in their sphere. This creates a bridge of relationship to people, allowing the credibility and relationship to share the message of the

Gospel. This again shows that the goals of pursuing justice and the mission of the church can converge and are not in tension with each other.

Limitations for churches in 'doing justice'

It is important to clearly identify what can be accomplished by a local congregation in the arena of social justice. Having hopes to accomplish something that is outside of the power of the church is setting people up for failure. Conversely, hoping for too little may reveal a lack of faith in God's work. Believers live in a tension of what is possible. Somewhere between the thin, easy optimism of humanism and the crushing pessimism of the cynic lies the Christian view of what is possible. By the transformative power of the Holy Spirit at work in people's lives, entire lives and communities can be transformed. People are not perfect, however, and we will never have a perfect society.

Jeremiah encouraged the exiles in Babylon to seek the shalom (peace or prosperity) of Babylon: "But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare." Jeremiah 29:7. As Christ-followers on this earth, we are to seek the shalom of the city in which we are placed. We have our work cut out for us.

Jeremiah 29:7 instructs those in exile to seek the shalom of the city. But we must recognize two limitations as we go about seeking the city's shalom:

a) **Only Christ can bring about ultimate, eternal shalom.**

Eternal Shalom was won from Jesus' death and resurrection. (Ref 2 Cor 5:18). Whilst earthly shalom is important, it falls short of the eternal shalom that Christ offers. There will never be peace or complete wholeness on this side of Jesus' return. Therefore we should not place our hope in achieving that.

b) **The church is not responsible for the work that is the responsibility of the government.**

There is no way that a church could afford to do the work of government in any kind of sustainable way. Instead, the church should be a voice to speak to the various governmental agencies to ensure quality service delivery. Individual believers, as active citizens, should work to hold various agencies accountable through various platforms.