

# Theology of Social Justice – Part 2

## 1. One mission: different functions

### Church gathered – what is the role of the church?

To answer this question adequately, one must distinguish between the institutional church (gathered believers under leadership and structures) and the organic church (the body of Christ made up of believers as individuals). There are biblical commands that are issued to the church that applies to the institutional church but not to the organic church and vice versa. It is therefore unhelpful to assume that commands and examples in the bible are equally applicable to both. This section will flesh out what the church institutional responsibility is in issues of social justice:

- The ministry of the Word is the priority for the local church. In other words, the first thing people need to be told when they attend church is: “believe in Jesus “– not “Do Justice”. People encountering Jesus will have a deeper need met and will thereafter have a gospel motivation to do justice.
- As responding to issues of social justice is a natural part of the life of a believer, the institutional church has a role to play in discipling their members to do so. Similarly, the method of addressing social justice issues has huge opportunities for both proclamation and church planting and so a strict line separating what the church should do and shouldn’t do is difficult to draw. Instead, certain principles should be established to evaluate opportunities.
- It is necessary for the church to provide meaningful opportunities for believers to respond – as avenues for an expression of their growing heart for social issues.
- Humanitarian work or justice work has a big role to play in society, but it is not the chief responsibility of the local church.
- Formal programmes that the church may start should not take attention, resources and pastoral care away from the leaders. For this to happen, individuals should be appointed by the elders to lead particular functions. It is not the responsibility of the elders to lead these formal programmes.
- A separate ministry or entity should be formed to provide direction and leadership to the church’s social justice response. This frees up skilled people to focus on their church and skilled people to focus on creating and maintaining ministries of justice. In this way, the institutional church does not directly address issues of social justice, but helps to engage and encourage participation of congregants.
- The family of believers comes first. The church should look to the needs and injustices within the community of believers (Galatians 6:10).
- The churches’ support of a programme should be influenced by the programmes’ ability to help further the mission of the church.
- Social ministries should reinforce other parts of discipleship – including family and stewardship of time and resources. These ministries help the believer live the gospel in the world.

The church produces people who change society. Stated another way: the church evangelizes and disciples people to (among other things) address issues of social justice. By showing and helping members love their neighbours, a natural result of that will be believers, in their everyday lives, individually and sometimes together, making an impact on the injustices of the city.

Tim Keller suggests that a heart for the poor 'sleeps' in a Christian's soul until it is awakened. Pastors and leaders have a role to awaken that sleeping desire. This cannot be done through guilt, but through grace and gospel. Inviting people into church-formed or church-aligned activities is a proven way of igniting that heart. Teaching and leadership should help to paint an accurate picture of injustices in the city. This should be a compelling vision that draws people in to participate.

As every believer is different, with different likes and vocations, the church leadership should disciple congregants in a way that affirms a variety of social justice concerns. They should not feel pressure to endorse, create a programme or partner with organisations for every good deed that Christians may engage in. The church values social justice and so works to equip people to participate in it without necessarily owning it or running it.

### **The role of the elders**

Preaching the word and serving the poor are not mutually exclusive. In Acts 6, Stephen and Phillip were leaders who both preached and distributed food to the widows. One cannot biblically defend that elders have no role to play in the arena of social justice. Paul, when welcomed by Peter, James and John, was charged to remember the poor (Gal 2:9-10). It is not reasonable, however, to expect elders to both pastor a congregation AND run an organisation or ministry serving the poor. The role of discipling the congregation cannot be outsourced, but the role of serving the poor can be delegated to trustworthy individuals, like in Acts 6.

Below are various expectations of elders in the arena of social justice:

- Recognise one's own journey in social justice: doing justice is not a destination, but a journey. Be authentic with your congregants regarding your successes and failures in this area.
- Model for the congregation and be vulnerable. Get involved in some practical way that will stir your own heart.
- Care for the poor in the congregation (through mercy ministry)
- Disciple congregants' lifestyles through a variety of context-specific events, communication and volunteer opportunities
- Provide teaching to ensure appropriate understanding of social justice
- Appoint, mandate, resource and lead congregants to provide leadership to justice issues and opportunities. This is the Social Justice Ministries in each congregation.
- Call people to opportunities to express their gifting in addressing social injustice
- Understand and maintain conviction of the theology underpinning activities of social justice
- Keep informed about gathered justice initiatives— including visiting on a periodic basis
- Encourage and affirm leaders of initiatives

- Provide directional strategy together with Common Good

### The role of individuals

The role of individual believers cannot be overstated. It is through every day actions by Christ-following family members, teachers, accountants, marketing people, artists, scientists and students that the mission of the church is played out in the world. These actions are often unnoticed but work together to build a better society, bringing shalom to the City.

The below serves as headlines for further contemplation and application:

#### a) Do not perpetrate injustice

Christ followers are to be those who are innocent of injustice and avoid any behaviour that perpetrates any form of injustice.

- Pay employees fairly (Eg James 5:4: “Behold, the wages of the labourers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, are crying out against you”)
- Do not oppress the poor – through cheating people of what is rightfully theirs, or pushing them down when they are already down (Amos 2).
- Do not use your power, wealth or influence to squeeze cheaper services or assets from the poor (Amos 6)
- Do not turn away the needy (Amos 5)
- Do not take bribes (Amos 6), or side with the rich because of what you can get from them

#### b) Live a lifestyle of reflecting social justice

Our lifestyle is the demonstration of our commitment to the Gospel. How we spend our money and time, whether we have an ethic of charity and service to the poor are indicators of our heart. Isaiah 58 outlines how important it is to have a faith integrated with seeking justice.

- Develop a healthy mindset of stewarding your finances. See your possessions as belonging to the Lord (1 Chron 29:11). This frees one up to earn well, save, and to give generously.
- Support those who vocationally serve the marginalised – whether through finances, prayer or moral support.
- Cultivate everyday generosity
- Build relationships across socio-economic and racial divides

#### c) Cultivate honouring attitudes

Regardless of education, class, money, assets, race, culture, religion or community – every single person is equal in the eyes of God. Any action that betrays that is sinful. This is broader than social justice, but one is often made aware of one’s attitudes when facing issues of social justice.

- Be good employers – treating all staff equally. Find ways to create training opportunities for those who have less access to opportunity.

- Show respect to every single person on your path.
- Check your motivation when giving or serving. If it is not from a place of love, it is likely to come from a heart of pride and superiority.

d) Act

Christ followers should seek to actively address injustice, whether or not they have been the cause of it. This proactivity is expressed in a wide range of ways. A few examples are as follows:

- Speaking up on behalf of those facing injustice – Proverbs 31:9 “...defend the rights of the poor and needy.”
- Volunteering at an organisation or initiative.
- Starting an organisation or initiative to address injustice
- Participating in various formal and informal activities that address injustice – whether through church or the workplace
- Engaging with people to give meaningful opportunities to get out of poverty

e) Pray

Jesus told his disciples what to pray only twice in his ministry: Firstly the “Lord’s prayer” in Matthew 6 and then asking the Lord of the harvest to send out workers:

“...pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest.” Matthew 9:35-38.

Believers are to be asking God to send out workers in the harvest field where there are people who are harassed and helpless – which is an apt description of victims of injustice.

- Pray for organisations, ministries and activities that stir your heart
- Pray for social justice issues
- Pray for God to stir more people’s hearts to respond to social injustice
- Pray for people in your midst who are victims of injustice

f) Strengthen the weak

God strengthens the weak (Ezekiel 34:16). This demonstrates a principle that must be considered when engaging in activities of social justice. One must focus on ways that empower people to not need help. Various books on good community development can assist in providing principles of how to truly strengthen people without creating dependency. Some of these principles include:

- Limit one-way giving to emergency situations
- Don’t do anything for someone that they can do for themselves
- Strive to empower the poor through employment, lending and investing
- Think and consider whether you are helping to make yourself feel good or truly meet someone else’s need
- Listen carefully to what is being said by the person you are assisting (taken from Toxic Charity by Robert Lupton)

## **2. Common Good**

Considering this theology, the city context and the church structures, Common Ground launched Common Good. Common Good is a ministry serving into the church as well as being a ministry to the city. Common Good provides resources to elders and support to Social Justice Ministry teams to ensure they support the elders in their discipleship of their congregation.

Common Good has a focus on City impact, too, by providing key services into the city along strategic focus areas. These strategic focus areas may change from time to time, but will always serve to proactively address issues of social justice. This may include ways for participation and contribution for the average Common Grounder.

Common Good and Common Ground are different legal entities, but are designed to assist each other in mutually beneficial ways.

Common Ground relies on Common Good in the following ways:

- Journeying with lead elders to support their own journey of doing justice
- Equipping Social Justice Ministry teams each congregation
- Providing key discipleship resources to be used by elders and SJM teams
- Providing key discipleship events – whether run by Common Good or by SJM teams
- Providing expertise to congregations in their pursuit of engaging with and responding to poverty and injustice in their context
- Providing training of various parties to ensure effective implementation. At times this is run by Common Good and at other times will involve training of trainers in SJM teams
- Providing opportunities for volunteer service in Common Good's city-wide programmes (currently Education, Employment and Early Childhood Development)
- Provides relationships/sites in other communities in which spiritual life may be birthed, opening the possibility of new Common Ground small groups and even congregations

In the public eye, Common Good is a non-profit, working to have an impact in the key areas of education, employment and early childhood development. All individuals engaged through Common Good initiatives are exposed to the gospel whilst having felt needs addressed. Many people come to faith through these initiatives. Common Good consult existing experts to ensure best practice and they use defined principles to ensure consistent partnership and community engagement.

Common Good works with other churches in strengthening their response to social justice. This takes the form of sharing their learning, processes and programmes. The manner in which this is shared is currently being developed.

### **3. Conclusion**

We have been placed in this city, in this time in our country's history. Importantly, God has not left us alone to do this. With the power of the Holy Spirit and the message of the Gospel, we can fill the city, from the comfortable suburbs next to the mountain to the streets of our townships with the message, life and fame of Jesus.