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Neither Jew nor Greek: Considering a Christian Social Justice Model

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Abstract

American society has been on a necessary trek towards social justice, mainly because of a history of institutional slavery, the systematic oppression of native peoples, and unnecessary gender bias. However, in the 21st century, social justice has not only become a rallying cry for socialism, but also a platform that has resulted in inequalities. In contrast, a Christian social justice model recognizes humanity as equal recipients of God's grace in that "God is no respecter of persons" (Acts 10:34, NIV). The "level playing field" of social justice is summarized in Jesus' words, "For God so loved the world..." (John 3:16a, NIV); however, a Christian Social Justice model, while respecting the notion of equality, does not guarantee equity, which pertains to outcomes.

Keywords: social justice, equality, equity

Of all tyrannies, a tyranny sincerely exercised for the good of its victims may be the most oppressive. It would be better to live under robber barons than under omnipotent moral busybodies. The robber baron's cruelty may sometimes sleep, his cupidity may at some point be satiated; but those who torment us for our own good will torment us without end for they do so with the approval of their own conscience (C.S. Lewis, *God in the Dock*, p. 292, as cited in Sowell, 1999).

Whether one views “social justice” in the United States as a legitimate and necessary movement or merely another unrealistic political goal, the notion exists because of historical and demonstrable injustices towards certain groups of people (think Africans and native Americans). The Apostle Paul wrote to the churches in Galatia,

So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus (Gal 3:26-28, NIV).

However, societies, long before that first-century writing, and since, have categorized and judged people based on gender, race, culture, nationality, socio-economic status, etc. Though Jesus led the first social justice movements, the irony is that humankind has since used scripture as a justification for travesties such as slavery and ethnic cleansing. Consummated social justice might not be attainable in the purest form, but the Christian’s responsibility to realize the Apostle Paul’s admonition is ever present.

Augsburger, as stated in Johnson (2011), shares that

universally, all humans share certain dimensions: *Biologically*, we are fundamentally alike; *socially*, we share certain ‘relational prerequisites’ (including a need for self-affirmation, a need to relate to others, and so on.); *ecologically*, we must adapt to our environments; *psychologically*, we all go through certain developmental processes; and *spiritually*, all human beings seek some form of connection with the transcendent (p. 12).

Society's Definition of Social Justice

It is important to begin with a secular definition of social justice, as it is a concept variously interpreted depending on circumstance and personage. A good summation is found in this description by Britannica:

Social justice, in contemporary politics, social science, and political philosophy, the fair treatment and equitable status of all individuals and social groups within a state or society. The term also is used to refer to social, political, and economic institutions, laws, or policies that collectively afford such fairness and equity and is commonly applied to movements that seek fairness, equity, inclusion, self-determination, or other goals for currently or historically oppressed, exploited, or marginalized populations.¹

Many trace modern social justice thought to political philosopher John Rawls' seminal work, "A Theory of Justice" (Rawls, 1971). Describing the distribution of benefits by means of what he termed "social cooperation," Rawls wrote,

A set of principles is required for choosing among the various social arrangements which determine this division of advantages and for underwriting an agreement on the proper distributive shares. These principles are the principles of social justice: they provide a way of assigning rights and duties in the basic institutions of society and they define the appropriate distribution of the benefits and burdens of social cooperation (p. 4).

¹ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/social-justice>

An apt modern illustration is income redistribution, the vehicles of which include the American tax code, various entitlement programs, and government subsidies. Another illustration is Affirmative Action, originally conceptualized in a Kennedy executive order² that addressed nondiscrimination in government employment. Accordingly, government contractors were to “take affirmative action to ensure that applicants are employed, and that employees are treated during employment, without regard to their race, creed, color, or national origin” (Part III, Subpart A). It is important to note that this first iteration of Affirmative Action did not allude to preferential hiring or quotas.

The damage of American slavery and the oppression of Native Americans is done, and the ramifications of those centuries surely exist today. In my decades of teaching, I have encountered many testimonies of marginalized people who have first-hand experience with social *injustice*.³ Therefore, some aspects of social justice still need to be recognized and addressed; however, added to the list of issues under the banner of social justice are, among others, climate change, LGBTQ+ issues, healthcare, and student loan forgiveness. Ergo, *social justice* has become a repository for political agendas that often seem counter to the very purpose of social justice. Is it just to allow transgender men to dominate women’s sports? Is it just to make middle-class taxpayers pay others’ student loan debts? Is it just to enact policies to purposefully exclude the

² Executive Order 10925 – Establishing the President’s Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity. (1961). <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/executive-order-10925-establishing-the-presidents-committee-equal-employment-opportunity>.

³ Years ago, one of my Native American students shared the discomfort of seeing Andrew Jackson’s picture on the \$20 bill, knowing that he was the architect of the infamous Trail of Tears.

best job candidates? This seems to be counter to the Hays and Erford (2018) definition of social justice as a “realization of a just and equitable world for all individuals” (p. 8).

Part of the challenge is in defining terms. Diller (2015) indicates that “the social reality of race in the United States does not conform to the existence of five distinct groups. Rather, only two bear any real social meaning: “White” and “Of Color” (p. 95).⁴ The problem with this notion is in defining these populations. I had a student years ago who divided humanity into two groups, melanated and non-melanated. Despite the physiological absurdity of this notion, she carried these monikers like a torch. It was her way of categorizing humanity as “white” and everyone else. Today, the acronym BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) is in vogue, but in essence, it still represents two groups.

Thomas Sowell challenged generally accepted tenets of social justice in his acclaimed work, *The Quest for Cosmic Justice* (1999). In a speech summarizing the book’s thesis, Sowell said,

Presumably, the vast ranges of undeserved inequalities found everywhere are the fault of "society" and so the redressing of those inequalities is called social justice, going beyond the traditional justice of presenting each individual with the same rules and standards. However, even those who argue this way often recognize that some undeserved inequalities may arise from cultural differences,

⁴ For more on the seemingly universal acceptance of this dichotomy, see Brooks, (2022).

family genes, or from historical confluences of events not controlled by anybody or by any given society at any given time.⁵

In essence, the pursuit of social justice has become mired in issues that are quite impossible to solve. To wit, consider these truisms:

- Abiding by rules of fair play has little to do with athletes' size, skill, aptitude, experience, or strategy.
- Despite the curriculum being presented simultaneously, the ability to grasp the material will vary among students.
- Not all people are promoted based on their abilities and aptitude, so the organization may suffer.
- Many biological males who decide to identify as female, compete and win in women's sports.
- The nomenclature (LGBTQIA2S+) for the range of gender identities and sexual orientations continues to grow, implying that tacit and universal acceptance is the only option.

Finally, social justice has relatively recently been manifested in various iterations of Diversity, Equality, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives. While DEI might have honorable goals—recognizing underrepresented groups in various organizations—the interpretation and implementation of DEI have become controversial. For instance, from the website of the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA)⁶, as of 2022, the FAA actively

⁵ There is a summation of Dr. Sowell's book here: <https://www.tsowell.com/spquestc.html>.

⁶ Please see https://www.faa.gov/jobs/diversity_inclusion.

seeks workers with “...complete paralysis, epilepsy, severe intellectual disability, psychiatric disability...” Surely, people with disabilities should not face discrimination if they can adequately perform in the workplace, but the other consideration is the safety of the traveling public. This is perhaps a result of a Presidential executive order of June, 2021.⁷

Notwithstanding the honorable intentions of social justice and DEI initiatives, they have become mired in a political climate that tolerates little more than abject acceptance of notions that result in more discrimination. Instead of selecting the best person for the job, employers engage in quota-filling, hoping that the employee works out.⁸ For instance, California governor Gavin Newsome did not even intimate that he would replace Senator Diane Feinstein with the most qualified person. He committed to choosing an African American woman. Even though an African American Woman might end up being the best candidate, Newsome discriminated against anyone who was not an African American woman. Teams in the National Football League strive to have the 11 best players—usually big, fast, and agile—on the field. Pro basketball players are predominately tall. It is a rather ridiculous notion to envision a pro team purposefully comprised of underrepresented social classes. Honorable social justice works to recognize Katherine Johnson (subject of the 2016 movie *Hidden Figures*), an African American woman who was indeed the best person for the job of calculating orbital

⁷ Please see <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/06/25/executive-order-on-diversity-equity-inclusion-and-accessibility-in-the-federal-workforce/>

⁸ See a short discussion featuring Pastor James Ward, Jr., Rachel Kargas (HR person), and Dr. Erec Smith (Assoc. Professor York College) on issues pertaining to DEI. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jJaMcOVyDNI>

mechanics for NASA's Mercury and Apollo missions. Contrast this with an opinion editorial in the Washington Post by Kathleen Parker. After describing poor job performance of Vice President Kamala Harris and suggesting she should step down, Parker says,

The Kamala conundrum comes down to this: She was picked because she was Black and female, a combo tantamount to job security. Now that she has become a burden to the Democratic ticket, Biden can't fire her. He can't risk alienating his base. Full stop.

Dr. Erec Smith, Associate Professor at York College says, "Contemporary DEI cannot work without what's called 'prescriptive racism.'"⁹ Smith (2024) writes,

Unlike traditional racism — the belief that particular races are, in some way, inherently inferior to others — prescriptive racism dictates how a person should behave. That is, an identity type is prescribed to a group of people, and any individual who skirts that prescription is deemed inauthentic or even defective. President Biden displayed prescriptive racism when he said "If you have a problem figuring out whether you're for me or Trump, you ain't Black," a statement that implicitly prescribes how Black voters should think.

Perhaps on the heels of the Supreme Court's June 2023 rejection of race-based admissions in colleges¹⁰, state legislatures continue to address what they perceive to be inequities in DEI concepts, especially as they pertain to universities/colleges. Some

⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jJaMcOVyDNI>

¹⁰ https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/22pdf/600us1r53_4q15.pdf

measures are designed to overtly negate the possible discriminatory effects of DEI. In Florida, the State Board of Education permanently prohibited DEI in the Florida college system.¹¹ According to the memo, *emphasis mine*:

The rule adopted by the Board defined, for the first time, DEI and affirmatively prohibits FCS institutions from using state or federal funds to administer programs that *categorize individuals based on race or sex for the purpose of differential or preferential treatment*. The Board's decision will ensure that taxpayer funds can no longer be used to promote DEI on Florida's 28 state college campuses.

The University of Florida alone was able to reallocate \$5 million after dismissing its DEI staff.¹² A Texas bill (SB17), which went into effect in January of 2024, also prohibits public institutions of higher learning to engage in DEI activities.¹³ At the time of this writing, the landscape of DEI is rapidly changing. The president of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), as cited in Sahakian (2024), eliminated a DEI hiring requirement, saying,

My goals are to tap into the full scope of human talent, to bring the very best to MIT, and to make sure they thrive once here. "We can build an inclusive environment in many ways, but compelled statements impinge on freedom of expression, and they don't work.

¹¹ <https://www.fldoe.org/newsroom/latest-news/state-board-of-education-passes-rule-to-permanently-prohibit-dei-in-the-florida-college-system.stml>

¹² <https://www.foxnews.com/media/university-florida-fires-all-dei-employees-compliance-state-law>

¹³ <https://compliance.utexas.edu/sb17>

Egalitarianism (i.e., equal rights; social equality) is an honorable doctrine, but sometimes problematic to legislate.

Equity vs. Equality

These famous words embody the Declaration of Independence: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”¹⁴ Given that most of the signers were slaveholders, interpreters of the Declaration have had to grapple with original, alternate, and evolving meanings of “equal.” In an article by DeWitte (2020), Jack Rakove, a professor at Stanford University, reflects in his research on meanings pertaining to the Declaration and the Constitution:

When Jefferson wrote “all men are created equal” in the preamble to the Declaration, he was not talking about individual equality. What he really meant was that the American colonists, as a people, had the same rights of self-government as other peoples, and hence could declare independence, create new governments and assume their “separate and equal station” among other nations. But after the Revolution succeeded, Americans began reading that famous phrase another way. It now became a statement of individual equality that everyone and every member of a deprived group could claim for himself or herself. With each passing generation, our notion of who that statement covers

¹⁴ <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript>

has expanded. It is that promise of equality that has always defined our constitutional creed.¹⁵

It seems that the American Revolution was the catalyst for reinterpretation. Today, much is heard about the “founding fathers” or the “framers,” but in the late 18th century, the perspectives of equality were in their embryonic forms. This ushers in the modern interpretation of key concepts. Just in the United States, going back to the women’s suffrage movement, on the fore are the notions of Civil Rights, Jim Crow, Women’s Liberation, LGBT, Occupy Wall Street, Black Lives Matter, Native American Activism, marriage equality, MeToo movement, Dreamers, Voting rights, Environmental activism (Green New Deal), Democratic Socialism, and more.

There is a very useful glossary of terms in Garrett’s (2023) book *Equality vs Equity: Tackling Issues of Race in the Workplace*. From this glossary, *emphasis mine*:

Equality The idea that everyone should be *treated equally* and receive the dignity and respect that they deserve and that their differences are celebrated.

Equity Understanding and giving those from the global majority what they need to achieve *equal outcomes*. This is achieved by considering systems that disadvantage and seeking to overcome them. To do so we need to take an individual approach, to lead, share power and focus on *outcomes*. This will balance the seesaw. (p. 100).

¹⁵ <https://news.stanford.edu/2020/07/01/meaning-declaration-independence-changed-time/>

In the above definitions, stark differences are seen, treatment vs. outcomes. If Rakove is correct, the framers of the Declaration simply did not fully envision what their use of the word “equal” would mean for the new and existing republic. To be sure, “equal” in the Declaration sense has a much wider swath. The ramifications of overt systemic racism persisted in the United States well into the 20th century and certainly, but perhaps less overtly, into the 21st century (for a list of early national responses, see Hildebrand, et al. (2008, pp. 31-33).

Before introducing a Christian model of Social Justice, it is worth noting that the teachings of Jesus certainly had their own evolutionary journey in the past two millennia. Christians persecuted themselves and non-believers. Starting in the first century A.D., sects and “denominations” arose. Scholars have disagreed as to the canon of scripture. Christians persecuted scientists and killed those who were judged to be heretical. Believers have wielded and manipulated scripture to justify eras of cruel delusion (think Salem “witches” and slavery). John Franke, as cited in Gundry, et al. (2013), posed this summation: “The history of the church is filled with erroneous and destructive understandings of the Bible that have led to the oppression and marginalization of others” (p. 275). Even in the 21st century, the debates continue.¹⁶

Thus, it is reasonable to believe that, despite words that clearly teach the greatest commandment (That we love one another, Mark 12:31), societies immemorial

¹⁶ Scheib (2016), describes pastoral theology as a form of practical theology (pp. 31-32). The misapplication might be here: A congregation may print “all are welcome here” on its church bulletin or church sign. And yet an otherwise well-meaning usher escorts an unkempt, presumed homeless person out of the sanctuary (p. 32).

would forget or reinterpret Scripture to allow the perpetuation of a caste system in which destinies are determined by gender, race, culture, and socioeconomic status, but just as the church eventually recognized the scientific efficacy of Galileo's findings, the church eventually saw—and continues to see—the realization that God sees no social strata determining whose soul is more important. So, for the 21st century, how might people interpret social justice, or more specifically, Christian social justice?

I am fascinated by the International Space Station (ISS). At 17,7000 miles per hour, it orbits the globe 16 times a day and is amazingly easy to see with the naked eye when it flies over (at night). Most intriguing, though, is that multiple times daily, astronauts see the relatively small planet where every aspect of history has occurred. From dinosaurs to rocket launches, it all happened on the confines of this blue ball. The best of humanity and the worst, all happened here. Early explorers took months to cross oceans, but the ISS passes over the largest oceans in minutes. Many astronauts have testified about their unique vantage and life-changing perspective.¹⁷ For the astronauts, whatever happened in human history that resulted in our utter disdain for one another seems to become awash in the realization that we share the earth.

Despite the difficulty or, as some would assert, improbability¹⁸ of attaining social justice, there is another vein of justice that is quite attainable, and the beginning is

¹⁷ See White, F. (1998). *The Overview Effect: Space Exploration and Human Evolution*. American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics. And Garan, R. (2015). *The Orbital Perspective*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

¹⁸ See Thomas Sowell's *The Quest for Cosmic Justice*.

realizing *Imago Dei*, that humans are created in God's image. Then, in turn, humanity recognizes that multiculturalism is a given. Instead of lamenting our differences, we move towards appreciating the human race as a wonderful *mélange* of tastes, cultures, gifts, and talents. In early adulthood, my formative years were spent in the military, which I credit for vastly expanding my cultural horizons. One of the most rewarding benefits from my military career was the opportunity to work with and live among a diverse representation of humanity. I recognized that *Imago Dei* was manifested in a wide array of skin pigments, facial features, languages, accents, customs, and cultures.

Here, it is appropriate to issue a word of caution, an admonition to avoid diminishing the need for social justice by claiming, "there's only one race, the human race." This is akin to someone claiming to be "colorblind" as a response to confronting prejudices.¹⁹ The "one race, human race" caveat, while embracing ultimate *Imago Dei*, misses the point of recognizing obvious human differences. Hays and Erford (2018) define race as "an arbitrary, socially constructed classification of individuals and is often based on physical distinctions such as skin color, hair texture, facial form, and shape of the eye" (p. 8). The key phrase is "arbitrary, socially constructed classification." Culture "consists of the shared values, practices, social norms, and worldviews associated with a particular cultural group" (p. 5). A cultural group can be defined by virtually anything that sets a group apart, lefthanders, Baptists, Democrats, realtors, veterans, women, etc. Even with the definitional nuances, a cultural group *can be* a racial group, and a racial group *can be* a cultural group. Sometimes I will say to my students something

¹⁹ See Mueller, J.C. (2017). Producing Colorblindness: Everyday Mechanisms of White Ignorance. *Social Problems*, 64, 219–238 doi: 10.1093/socpro/spw061.

like, “Today, we are going to look at the race/culture of Asian Americans,” but that does not mean that race and culture are synonymous.

Returning to social justice and Imago Dei, remember the astronauts who circle the earth 16 times a day. Do they see races and cultures from their vantage point? Do they see political, social, and religious differences, as they soar over countries and continents? Is God impressed with the walls people have built and the borders so heavily guarded?

While Thomas Sowell makes a cogent argument for the difficulty (impossibility?) of realizing “cosmic” social justice, the need for justice—or some level of attention or correction—is evident. The Church is no doubt a key participant in this quest. Thus, I endeavor to define and describe a Christian Social Justice model, beginning with Biblical illustrations.

Illustration 1: Neither Jew nor Greek: Social Justice begins with Imago Dei

The entire book of Galatians, the apostle Paul’s letter to churches in Galatia, addresses similar issues as the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15, but instead of Jewish customs being on the fore, the issues with the Galatian Christians pertain to Christians who were *reverting* to Jewish customs and laws, ostensibly at the expense of freedom in Christ. But the message is also a lesson in equality. In Paul’s lengthy letter to the churches, he says,

“So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither

Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:26-29, NIV).

This is yet another reminder of Imago Dei, that humans are equal in that they are created in God’s image; however, after Imago Dei, differences abound. Estep & Kim (2010) emphasize it this way:

The Christian community, the church, is a transcultural, but not an acultural, community. The church does recognize the diversity of cultures she serves. Even within the New Testament, congregations acknowledge the presence of a different groups comprising them. Perhaps most evident would be Jews and Gentiles (p. 287).

Humans have a penchant for categorizing people based on perceptions that are often founded on ill-conceived and misunderstood notions. Regardless of the source of these notions, they often influence our perceptions of how people exist—or should exist—in modernity. When I lived in the Philippines in the 1980s, I had American friends who expressed “disbelief” that after a typhoon wiped out thousands of Nipa Huts (bamboo, thatch), people would build another nipa hut in its place, as if these poverty-stricken Filipinos could somehow just decide to build a fortified, typhoon-proof brick home. I know people in the 21st century who still think “unevenly yoked”²⁰ means interracial marriage, but there are “softer” illustrations, too. For instance, many Christians believe (or accept) that women can be heads of state, surgeons, professors,

²⁰ See 2 Cor 6:14ff

astronauts, and fighter pilots, but should not presume to teach men in the church.²¹

Illustrations abound. The penchant for categorizing people results in a judgement of what constitutes “equal.” That is, as mentioned above, though our country’s founding documents describe “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” as an unalienable right, there were apparently some caveats.

The summation is in Galatians 5:6, ““For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love” (NIV).

Illustration 2: The Parable of the Talents: Social Justice is *not* about equal outcomes

Matthew 25 is the account of Jesus’ parable of the talents. A man with resources entrusted three men (stewards) with three different portions of his wealth. The two stewards with the most money each doubled his amount. The third man buried his amount, ostensibly for safe keeping. When the owner returned, he received a generous return on his investment in the two good stewards, but the third man returned the same amount with which he had been entrusted. The two good stewards were handsomely rewarded, but the third man was punished, called lazy. In the story, the money entrusted to the third man was “redistributed” to one of the other stewards; however,

²¹ See 1 Tim 2:11-12. My perspective is that this one verse is taken out of context, especially when studied against the rest of the New Testament. Rick Warren makes a cogent argument. See <https://www.christianpost.com/news/rick-warren-explains-what-changed-his-mind-on-women-pastors.html>

this redistribution was in the opposite direction of what modern proponents of redistribution support.

Voddie Baucham, interviewed by Ben Shapiro²², echoes the aforementioned definition of social justice as “redistribution of wealth, privileges, and opportunities. Social justice is about equity, not equality.” He affirms—as stated above—that equity is about equal outcomes. When resources or opportunities are redistributed (in the modern sense), the *goal* is equal outcomes. Using Jesus’ parable of the talents to illustrate the differences and nuances of equity and equality, Baucham concludes that Christian social justice is *not* about equal outcomes.

As a university educator for almost three decades, I have seen well-intentioned programs (e.g., federal financial aid, relaxed admissions criteria, recruitment targeting, etc.) facilitate a path for students to sit in a classroom (intent: equality), while failing to gauge whether the student has the academic prowess to succeed (equity). The abilities of individual students were subordinate to the intent to facilitate an equal outcome. Perhaps instead of *Diversity-Equity-Inclusiveness*, a better phrase would be *Diversity-Equality-Inclusiveness*.

Illustration 3: The Woman at the Well: Samaritan Lives Matter

²² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CMiXQ-iODyk>

John chapter 4 contains the account of the Woman at the Well, or more specifically, the Samaritan Woman at the Well. In Israel at the time, the Samaritans were anathema. The history goes back to when the tribes of Israel were taken captive (The Northern kingdom fell to Assyrians in 721 B.C., and the Southern kingdom fell to the Babylonian Empire in 586 B.C.). Some Israelites who remained intermarried with foreigners and became, in essence, part Jew and part Gentile. When Nehemiah was allowed return to Israel to rebuild the city walls, the Samaritans opposed the project and caused problems (Nehemiah 6:1-14). Thus began the long-lasting strife between Jews and Samaritans. In Jesus' day, Jewish travelers who had to go between the regions of Galilee (northern Israel) and Judea (southern Israel) often made the journey so that they would not have to walk through the region of Samaria (central Israel). Even Jesus had been known to take the Jordan route (Matthew 19:1-2; Mark 10:1), but perhaps for very different reasons.

In John's gospel, Jesus made a point to walk through Samaria. In fact, scripture says "Now he *had* to go through Samaria" (John 4 4, NIV, emphasis mine). In the meeting at Jacob's well, Jesus was confronting at least two important social issues, both described in the phrase "Samaritan woman." No doubt the disciples remembered the incident at the well when, before Jesus ascended, He said, "... you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8b, NIV). Lingenfelter and Mayers (2003) invoked Philippians 2 (the *Kenosis* passage) that it was indeed Almighty God creating this illustration in what could be construed as a component of social justice.

Jesus was obviously showing his disciples that the good news of the Gospel was for all people. Many of the framers of Critical Race Theory envisioned the goal of educating people to the prevalence of systemic racism (Brooks, 2022). Modern movements such as Black Lives Matter echo the concern of minority groups who still feel the sting of racism. To a person who has never been marginalized, these movements might have little meaning. Many Jews in the first century simply walked around Samaria on the other side of the Jordan; “out of sight, out of mind.” This did not change the fact that Samaritans were part of the beloved flock of sheep the Savior invites into His care.

Illustration 4: Zaccheus: Diversity and inclusion

Luke 19:1-10 is the account of Zaccheus, a chief tax collector who was apparently short in stature. As Jesus approached, Zaccheus could not see above the crowd, so he climbed a tree for a better view. What was Zaccheus’ fascination? Why was he interested? For one thing, there’s a celebrity in town. Jesus quickly garnered quite the reputation for the miraculous, and people were understandably curious. But there are many nuances to this story left up to the interpreter.

Jesus approached the tree, looked up, and said,

“Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today” (NIV).

“Zacchaeus!” he said. “Quick, come down! I must be a guest in your home today” (NLT).

“Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today” (ESV).

“Zacchaeus, hurry down, for I must stay at your house today” (BSB).

Zacchaeus, make haste, and come down; for today I must abide at thy house (KJV).

“Zaccheus, hurry and come down, for today I must stay at your house” (ASB).

“Zacchaeus, hurry and come down because today it is necessary for me to stay at your house” (CSB).²³

²³ I included several versions of the same phrase to emphasize the similarity in translation.

First, notice that Jesus called him by name. Imagine the surprise! Zacchaeus was not only impressed—to say the least—with this celebrity’s reputation, but Jesus called Zacchaeus by name and then basically indicated what he would be doing the rest of the day. Jesus again took his ministry to an unexpected audience, including a tax collector, offering a gesture of equality by extending salvation to a socially-undesirable character, and solidifying His reputation as a minister to “sinners.” I am keenly aware of the context of this illustration; that it does not discuss hiring, promotion, or college admission policies; however, in a Christian social justice model, the larger point is that Jesus went against social conventions and expectations in reaching Zacchaeus. It is not an illustration of Affirmative Action. It is an illustration of our *sameness* in needing a touch from God.

A note about sameness; when I was a hospice chaplain, I saw how trauma and bereavement reach people of various races, cultures, and socioeconomic status. When a person’s physical body is shutting down, it is impossible to tell the differences in resumes, achievements, accolades, or wealth. Status means virtually nothing. “[God] causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous (Matt 5:45b, NIV). The church is still learning this.

Illustration 5: Acts 15, The Jerusalem Council: Making etic subordinate to emic

In multicultural counseling, the counselor’s perspective is often described as either etic or emic. The etic perspective views people from a rather universal—or outsider’s—perspective, assuming that people are basically the same. Simplistically, the

implication is that the one counseling approach works for all people dealing with the same issues. In society, the etic perspective is exemplified when someone asserts, “everyone in America has the same opportunities,” or “everyone can achieve the American Dream.” The emic—or insider’s—perspective considers the individual; that there are differences pertaining to race, culture, socioeconomic status, environment, gender, sexual identity, etc. The emic perspective might say, “there is so much inequality in America, we need to take steps to level the playing field.”²⁴

Some Jewish Christians in the early first century seemed to take the etic position when they assumed new Gentile believers had to be circumcised. The next illustration is the Council of Jerusalem, found in Acts chapter 15. For simplicity, consider two first-century groups in which humankind existed: Jews and Gentiles. The new Christian church consisted of converts from both groups. Consider that the Jews carried with them thousands of years of culture, traditions, and laws. Suddenly, following Christ ushered in a new era. One can only imagine the disconnect between Yahweh worship as described in the Hebrew scriptures and the new “Way” (Acts 9:2), which at the time had no recognized written scripture. Moreover, the Mosaic Law—in the legalistic sense—did not apply. Later, this would be clarified in the book of Hebrews—which, at the time of the Jerusalem council, had not been written. Nonetheless, the “etic” Jews purported to require Gentile males (even adults) to be circumcised.

If the city of Jerusalem represented Jewish Christians, perhaps Syrian Antioch represented Gentile Christians. Acts 15:1 says, “Certain people came down from Judea

²⁴ For an excellent discussion of the Euro-American influence, see chapter 2 of Townsend (2009).

to Antioch and were teaching the believers: ‘Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved’” (NIV). In an etic sense, the Jewish Christians were applying at least this one Hebrew tradition (law) to Gentile Christians. This was the beginning of a schism that characterized many portions of the New Testament. So-called Judaizers promoted adherence to certain customs of traditional Judaism and levied these rules on themselves and Gentile converts.

1 Cor 9:19-23 also illustrates this nicely:

Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings (1 Cor 9:19-23, NIV).

The apostle Paul seizes an opportunity to describe his zeal for propagating the gospel by relating to his diverse audiences. Jerry Falwell had a similar philosophy with his “saturation evangelism: ”Reaching every available person by every available means at every available time” (Dempsey, 2013, pp. 3-4). No doubt, this is why Christians maintain a robust presence on the worldwide mission field. This zeal should also characterize the goal of honorable stewardship. In this sense, stewardship is simply an ethical and just way of doing things. Since the world we live in is not perfect, precluding

the need for social justice, Christians should be leaders in “righting” the wrongs of past and present societies. I wonder what the letters of Paul would look like if he could address the churches during and along the past two millennia. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, how would he address churches during the Crusades? The Reformation? The American Civil War?

Illustration 6: Matt. 25: Benevolence is love in action

In a discourse in which Jesus was inviting righteous people to their reward, He said to them:

“For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’

“Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’

“The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me’” (Matthew 25:35-40, NIV).

A Christian social justice model is characterized by stewardship. Stewardship manifests itself in benevolence, and benevolence is love in action. The church must

lead the way. Consider how Jesus ministered as He walked on earth. He never expected the Romans to help the poor. He expected believers to help, as a result of changed hearts! Going back to Galatians, Paul reminds us in Galatians 6:9, “Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up” (NIV). The Romans were absolutely not going to step in and address any social ills among their Jewish subjects.

In several decades of ministry, I have encountered various definitions and markers of “Christian.” That is, what makes a person Christian and, thereafter, how will he or she be recognized as Christian. The markers have included confession, baptism, “the sinner’s prayer,” good works, stewardship, church attendance, sacrament fulfillment, and spiritual gifts. These are all good characteristics, and Christians definitely need to exercise a number of spiritual disciplines, but I have emphasized one principle for many years: John 13:35, “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (NIV). On one of the occasions when the “teachers of the law” tried to entrap Jesus with tricky questions, the man asked Jesus, ““Of all the commandments, which is the most important?” (Matt 22:36, NIV). Imagine the gravity of that question. After all, there were 613 laws.²⁵ The passage continues.

Jesus replied: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself (Matt 22:37-39).

²⁵ See Friedberg, 2013

In 1962, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., spoke at Cornell College. In a speech, he said,

I am convinced that men hate each other because they fear each other. They fear each other because they don't know each other, and they don't know each other because they don't communicate with each other, and they don't communicate with each other because they are separated from each other."²⁶

One could argue that Dr. King's thesis in life was racial reconciliation through unity. Colossians 3:12-14 is an appropriate reminder:

Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity (NIV).

Conclusion

Christian Social Justice might be summed up thusly:

- A definition of "social justice" recognizes victims and oppressors.
- Egalitarianism is an honorable political doctrine, but problematic to legislate.
- Humans are all are created in God's image, but this commonality (equality) is not about equal outcomes.
- Efforts to promote equal outcomes should not be misconstrued with efforts toward equality, which do not apply to giftedness, talent, intellect, or ability.

²⁶ <https://news.cornellcollege.edu/dr-martin-luther-kings-visit-to-cornell-college/>

- Purveyors of social justice make the emic (insider) perspective subordinate to the etic (outsider) perspective.
- Efforts to ensure equal opportunity (think, “level the playing field”) often result in the same kind of discrimination it seeks to remove.
- Rather than claiming to be above the fray, it is more beneficial to recognize that people are still victims and oppressors. Denying the need for social justice is akin to claiming to be colorblind.
- Social justice is about genuine love, and it is love for which we must be known.
- Our human existence is about stewardship, as love is benevolence in action.

Illustrations indicate that components of Social Justice are imbedded in the New Testament. As far back as the 1960s, the Church’s responsibility to care for the oppressed were described in so-called “Liberation theology” (Veigel, 2018). It was designed to “answer to the question of how the Church should react practically in a situation where the people it’s serving is suffering under the great oppression caused by the social and political structures and relationships” (p. 82). Tan (2011) describes this as a “the social justice tradition” of Christian spirituality, emphasizing compassion for others (p. 370).²⁷ The Church’s responsibility here should not take anyone by surprise.

When Jesus responded to the disciples who were questioning the monetary worth of the perfume Mary (sister of Martha and Lazarus) used to anoint Jesus’ feet, He said, “The poor you will always have with you...” (Matt 26:11a, NIV). Indeed, the point of this story is more significant than this, but it illustrates that—for whatever reasons—not

²⁷ This is in the context of “six major traditions of Christian faith:” contemplative, holiness, charismatic, social-justice, evangelical, incarnational (p. 370).

everyone will be prosperous. The implication is obvious, that we will have the *advantaged* and the *disadvantaged*; the *affluent* and the *destitute*. I would add that we are likely to always have the *brilliant* and the *unintelligent*; the *achievers* and the *complacent*. Jesus taught us that there is efficacy in focusing our attention on those who are marginalized, and this involved the notion of equality. But attempting to equalize outcomes by trying to reward poor performers is when social justice breaks down.

Interestingly, in the first century, the Jewish people were the epitome of a marginalized race/culture. They and a host of other cultures desperately needed social justice. Akin to Critical Race Theory, it is not difficult to imagine if a group of Jewish scholars declaring that there was systemic racism in the Roman culture, not only against the Jews, but against other conquered peoples. The Romans would decry such a movement as subversive and dangerous. Would people be surprised to find a parchment in the Qumran caves written by a Zealot that said, in effect, Jewish Lives Matter? Would the Jews be entitled to claim Indigenous Land Rights? Could we blame first-century Jewish women for wanting to be heard?

A song written in 1955 (by Jill Jacson and Sy Miller) began with this line: "Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me." If it begins with me, I must continually consider and evaluate my own contributions to peace. What part do I play in bringing humanity together? How am I combating divisiveness? Here is the epilogue of the Church's calling: "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law" (Gal 5:22-23, NIV).

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