

How Should Christians Address Social Injustices?

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Although the Bible does not contain the phrase “social justice,” the Bible has much to say about **justice**: *to give to each person his due*. The Bible also speaks frequently of **mercy**: *to show compassion to those who suffer hardships*.

In Psalm 82:3–4, Asaph prays to God:

Defend the poor and fatherless;
Do justice to the afflicted and needy.
Deliver the poor and needy;
Free them from the hand of the wicked.

Isaiah teaches love for our neighbors (Isaiah 1:17):

Learn to do good;
seek justice, rebuke the oppressor;
defend the fatherless, plead for the widow.

Micah emphasizes a parallel between how we treat each other and how we honor God (Micah 6:8):

What does the Lord require of you,
but to do justly, to love mercy,
and to walk humbly with your God?

God, not man, draws the line between **justice** and **injustice**, between **righteousness** and **sin**. God condemns the exploitation of laborers (Leviticus 19:13), the mistreatment of foreigners (Exodus 12:49), and the manipulation of the market to one’s own selfish gain (Proverbs 20:23).

“**Social justice**” is a modern, not biblical, phrase. It was coined in the 1800s to refer to social reforms for reducing poverty. The term recently has come to include elimination of any inequality, such as between races or between various groups in the ever-broadening array of “sexual diversity.” The term “**equity**” today typically has socialist overtones, rejecting biblical moral principles.

The “**diversity**” and “**inclusion**” slogans of today’s “social justice” wrongfully portray sexual immorality as worthy of political protection, and just as wrongfully regard “race” as fundamental to human nature. God condemns transgendered and homosexual behaviors, to the point of withdrawing His presence from the hardhearted (Deuteronomy 22:5; Romans 1:24–27). Amid ethnic diversity, the Bible emphasizes the **unity** of all people: created in God’s image, fallen into sin, and redeemed by the world’s only Savior, Jesus Christ.

Another “social justice” confusion has do with

the relationship between **personal** and **public** responsibility. Whose fault is injustice? What steps should each of us take to correct it? The matter is particularly puzzling with regard to racism, which may be considered as *individual* acts of malice toward people on the basis of their race as well as *institutional* or *systemic* patterns that cause racial inequalities to persist. What is each person supposed to do to correct these problems?

Christian theology offers some helpful guidance for addressing systemic social problems. The doctrine of vocation, the distinction between the two kingdoms, and the relationship between the three estates are three important teachings that help people figure out how to work individually and as groups in order to correct problems such as poverty and racism.

First, the **doctrine of vocation** teaches that each Christian has a “calling” (*vocatio* in Latin) to serve God according to his or her station in life. Mothers have a vocation to nurture their children. Soldiers have a vocation to protect their nation. Farmers have a vocation to provide food for the community. *Vocation is how each person’s station in life serves as a channel of God’s blessings to the people entrusted to their care.*

God is the source of all blessings, while people are His instruments—sometimes with similar callings, sometimes with distinctive callings. *Within vocation, each person discovers his or her special role in addressing social problems.*

Second, the biblical distinction of the **two kingdoms** emphasizes that God has established *the church* and *the state* for different purposes and that He has given them different tools. Pastors are called by God to teach His Word faithfully. The Word of God includes *the corrective Law* that identifies racism and the exploitation of the poor as grave sins; and also *the comforting Gospel* that proclaims God’s undeserved love and forgiveness to sinners who repent. Governors, legislators, and judges have a different calling than pastors. Their civil offices serve as God’s establishments on earth to protect the innocent and punish the evildoer.

While the church may speak with a prophetic voice to correct a tyrannical government that fails

to promote justice, the church should not micromanage political affairs; neither should the state meddle in theology. *Both kingdoms belong to God, but God uses each one for a distinct purpose.*

Third, the **three estates** encompass our vocations and reveal our places within the two kingdoms as well as within the family. Each person has multiple, overlapping vocations in the three estates: *the family, the church, and civil society*. As a father, a man is called by God to admonish his children not to mistreat anyone on the basis of race and to model for them how to be generous to the poor. As a Sunday school teacher, the same man is called by God to teach that God is the protector of widows and orphans and that He calls upon us to serve their needs. As a citizen, that same man may have yet another set of callings, such as to organize a community food drive, vote for candidates committed to justice under law, and to write letters to the editor that expose social ills and suggest practical political solutions.

A person's vocations within the three estates flow from both **Law** and **Gospel**. As for *Law*, it is within vocation that people love their neighbor as themselves. Consider the "neighbors" whom the man in the preceding paragraph has as a father, as a Sunday school teacher, and as a citizen. Christians do not submit to a vague command to love all of humanity—"humanity" is an abstract concept. God's command is to love actual persons in our vocations: neighbors with names and faces.

It is, however, the *Gospel* that makes vocation a *Christian* calling. Anyone can have a "job to do." But Christians—those who believe the Good News that in Christ all their sins have been forgiven—have something more than a mere job. Christians have hearts overflowing with thankfulness to God for the forgiveness of their sins, and this thankfulness naturally shows itself in a loving concern toward their neighbors. Vocation is the Holy Spirit at work in and through a Christian's life, sanctifying that person to bear good fruit—good works that glorify God and serve the people whom God entrusts to that person's care.

So, when it comes to "**social justice**," the Christian asks: "Whom has God entrusted to my care today? How may I show love to that person today? God is the protector of the widow and the orphan, the One who pleads the cause of the poor, the One who died on the cross to redeem individuals of every language, people, tribe, and nation. God has placed me within my family, within my church, and within my culture to be a beacon of His blessings to those in my midst. How has God already been at work through my vocations, without my realizing it? What new opportunities has God placed before me today?"

The world, decrying that this is not good enough, will demand radical reforms that disrespect God's establishments. Wayward congregations will exchange the preaching of Christ's forgiveness of sinners for the preaching of a "social gospel" instead. Such churches will transform minimum wage, universal healthcare, and amnesty for illegal immigrants into dogma—as if a person cannot be a true Christian unless subscribing to a particular political view. Other churches go to the other extreme, as if *laissez faire* economics, libertarian politics, or border control are uniquely biblical. But none of these ideas are the marks of the true church.

The **marks of the church** are that the Gospel is preached in its truth and purity and that the Sacraments are rightly administered. (Augsburg Confession VII) The marks of a legitimate civil government are that the innocent are protected and the guilty are punished. (Augsburg Confession XVI) The marks of a healthy home are that husband and wife lead chaste and decent lives and raise their children in the fear and knowledge of the Lord. (Fourth and Sixth Commandments) It is within the church as God established it, the state as God established it, and the family as God established it, that Christians discover a set of divine callings—vocations—for serving the spiritual and material needs of those in their midst. Neither justice nor mercy, properly defined, can be found on earth apart from God's own establishments of home, church, and state.

Ultimately, God's people take comfort in knowing that Jesus' kingdom is not of this world, and that the Father shows **mercy** because the Son has satisfied **justice**. The Christian's boast is never that poverty has been (or can be) eliminated, racial harmony has been (or can be) achieved, or social justice has been (or can be) realized. The Christian's boast is that sins can and indeed have been forgiven, through Christ nailed to the cross.

When the **Gospel** motivates Christians to serve the needs of their neighbors, the Gospel does not then step aside so that social justice may take center stage; rather, the Gospel continues to shine as a heavenward beacon, reminding all that any bliss found on this earth is but a shadow of the things to come. We show love on earth because God has loved us from heaven to earth, to bring us to heaven, and so we point the way for others.

Dr. Ryan C. MacPherson is the director of the Center for Apologetics and Worldviews, and professor of history, philosophy, and legal studies at Bethany Lutheran College.

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