
Responding to “Social Justice”

Romans 12:2

Pastor Russ Kennedy

²Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Social justice is all the rage now, not just in our culture, but also all over the world. There is enormous pressure on and in the church to assume and adopt the social justice beliefs and therefore, its actions. The rhetoric and accompanying intimidation have been extraordinarily effective. The typical social justice warrior believes that equal opportunity and equal treatment under the law are not true justice; *true* social justice is only achieved when we have equality of outcome, status, and wealth.

The church has often too easily imported the world’s ideas and so-called wisdoms. Whenever it has done so, it has eroded the gospel, supplanted reliance on God and His providence and undermined the very purposes and processes God has given to the church. We have too easily and uncritically adopted the most recent fads in culture and in theology. Anything that changes, expands, or displaces the gospel at the center of the center is to be rejected. It does not matter who, what great contemporary leader, what respected and much-followed pastor embraces it, these worldly wisdoms must be carefully evaluated. This is how psychology and psychiatry infected the church. This is how the social gospel corrupted denomination after denomination. This is how the seeker churches watered down the discipleship demands of the gospel. This is how Marxism entered the churches in third world churches. And now, a form of it is entering the churches through the social justice movement in the church.

Dangerously, feminism, critical race theory, intersectional theory, LGBT activism, unlawful immigration policies, animal rights, and other progressive and liberal causes are all being argued for and accepted by evangelicals – even prominent pastors and theologians - under the banner of “social justice.” (adapted from J. MacArthur, GTY.org)

Listen to me carefully:

This is an introduction to the issues, not a comprehensive dealing with all the nuances. There is much that will go unsaid, unanswered, and undealt with.

We will deal with this subject much more in detail in the series on or after Amos in the Spring.

In all that I am going to say, I am taking a risk to be misrepresented. I say this because I find many times when people are quoted on this subject, and I go back to the original source, the quote is lifted out of context or is actually edited, yes ellipses (...) are inserted, but the edited meaning is different than what the person actually wrote. This is evil and needs to be called out whenever someone does it. And don’t you do it either.

It is important for you to understand a few things:

I believe that many injustices have been inflicted on people throughout the world and in our nation and history. Just because we are against the social justice movement does not mean that we fail to recognize the prevalence of true injustice in the world.

I believe that slavery in the world has had a terrible effect on all different kinds of people. Just because we are against social justice movement does not mean that we fail to recognize the dreadful effects of institutional slavery.

I believe that poverty is a terrible thing. I have seen some of the worst in the villages in Africa where I grew up, in the alleys of China, in the Gypsy villages in Romania and Moldova, in tarpaper shacks in northern Alabama, in the *barrios* of Sao Paulo and the settlements in Namibia. Just because we are against the social justice movement does not mean that we have no care or concern for the poor in the world.

I believe that the present understanding of “social justice” is not Biblical and therefore confuses the discussion enormously. Too often when you say you disagree with Black Lives Matter or the social justice movement, people say you don’t care about people’s plight or even worse, you can’t understand because of “white privilege”. I refuse to be canceled or shut up with this technique.

I come to this question as a Biblicist first and foremost. All of life is to be interpreted through the lens of the Bible, rightly interpreted as a New Covenant churchman. I also come to this having taught U.S. History, World History, Economics, Government, U.S. Government, and Geopolitical theory. And finally, I have seen firsthand the destructive effects of socialism and Marxism and “social justice” theory in China, Moldova, Romania, and to a lesser degree here. These worldviews have been universally against the church. And now, they have infiltrated the church. When I hear this, I hear the seductive hiss of a beautiful creature in God’s garden of the church. Will the Lord’s bride be deceived and seduced?

The Reasoning for the Church

Just as we need a Biblical view of the oneness of humanity and pervasiveness of sin and depravity to deal with the modern race issue, we also need a Biblical understanding of justice.

It is always better to have a Biblical understanding of a subject directly from and only from the Bible. Then, having established what the Bible says, then we are prepared to (a) identify corollaries in the world and (b) engage corrupted versions of the Biblical and [c] counter un- or anti- Biblical myths, errors and false wisdoms.

Basic Biblical Worldview:

1. God has created the world, given it its true meaning and interpretation, and has revealed that in the Scriptures.
2. Truth exists outside of people's understanding and is revealed in the Scriptures. All other facts and interpretations of facts are to be measured against the Scriptures.
3. Authority exists outside of people. The authority spheres exist because God has instituted them, defining their place, functions, limitations, and relationships to each other.
4. There is only one metanarrative that tells the true story of history. Other narratives may be approximately true but are false when they contradict the Redemptive story of the Bible.

5. Human beings are fallen, sinful and trending towards depravity. Sin and evil are "normal" in the world. Moral restraint only occurs by God's direct and indirect actions in the world.
6. From the beginning, sinful human beings have lied, blame shifted, murdered, rebelled, worshipped idols, and created social structures designed to further their sin.
7. And so much more...

Basic Biblical teaching on justice:

1. Biblical Justice requires the application of God's righteousness to individual humans and to communities of humans.
2. God's righteousness is revealed as a moral framework in the natural order, in the conscience, through God's personal revelation, through God's written revelation and finally through the Lord Jesus Christ.
3. Biblical Justice operates through a system of law, whether formal or functional, which is applied without partiality, bias, favoritism, or corruption.
4. Biblical Justice serves primarily to ensure the liberty and safety of law-abiding people by deterring, restraining, and punishing law breakers.
5. Where Biblical Justice is exercised, people will be most free. Where unbiblical justice is exercised, people will be enslaved and descend into corruption, poverty, and chaos.
6. Biblical Justice is to be tempered in mercy and grace, but never with favoritism, bias, or partiality. The charitable aspects of justice are illustrated all through the Bible: goodwill toward all and care for outsiders. Among God's people, there should be compassion for the disadvantaged; assistance for the fatherless and the widow; and providing needy people with the necessities of life (Acts 2:42-27; 4:32-37; Hebrews 13:16; note also: Psalm 140:12; Ezekiel 22:29).
7. Biblical justice does not show partiality to the poor or disenfranchised in an effort to even the scales of privilege or right the wrongs of the past.
8. God will one day enact true, complete, and universal justice through the judgment on Jesus Christ at the cross, procuring mercy for His saints: or through the judgement of all sinners at the Last Day.

As one writer put it, "Those aspects of true justice are conspicuously missing from the recent evangelical dialogue touting "social justice." Instead, what we hear is an echo of the same accusatory rhetoric and political slogans being shouted by secular social justice warriors." (*The Injustice of Social Justice*, John MacArthur, GTY.org)

Basic Principles of Social Justice Theory

1. Human beings define what is real. There is no reality outside of people's perception and interpretation.
2. Human beings each have their own truth. There is no objective truth apart from the person or community's definition.
3. The fundamental problem in human society is social injustice: that is, one group of privileged people exploit or oppress another group of people without the defined privilege. Examples:
 - a. Historical Marxist theory: The rich or the powerful oppress the poor or the common people.
 - b. Current racial justice: White people, "the privileged", oppress non-whites, the "oppressed".
4. The ultimate authority in a society is the people but ultimately, the oppressed or the victims. In order for oppressed peoples to have a voice, the oppressors must be canceled or destroyed giving the victims their rightful and ultimate voice.
5. Social justice is the reversing, righting and reparation of these evils of exploitation and oppression by revolution, that is, the overturning of any and all societal structures that enable the oppression. Examples:
 - a. The oppression by the Russian Czars and the Chinese Emperors who were overthrown through revolution giving the people the right to rule themselves.
 - b. The oppression and exploitation by masters of slaves which was halted by legal fiat ending the institution of slavery. Full reversal and no reparation has yet been made.
 - c. The exploitation of the workers by the owners and bosses of corporations which was overthrown by dissolving monopolies and instituting labor unions.
 - d. The oppression of racial and sexual minorities by whites and religious heterosexuals which is being overthrown by dismantling the institutions sustaining that oppression; namely, nuclear home, representative government and evangelical churches.
6. Social justice can only be achieved by the submission of the oppressors to the will of the victims.
7. Social justice has no theory of judgement beyond the life of the oppressor or the victim giving rise then to an urgency to overturning the institutions of oppression by escalating means of leverage including violence.

The Resolution is in the Church (Ephesians 2)

We have studied Ephesians 2 in some depth. Look at the text a little differently see how God has is at work in the church to provide a truly holy, loving and just society.

With the Explanation of our Sin (2:1-3)

Sin separates us from God and one another...

2 And you were dead in the trespasses and sins ²in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— ³among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.

Sin conforms to the world's ways and thought leaders...

Sin corrupts the people and institutions in the world...

In the Existence of the Church (v.4-16)

The church is the new humanity, the new people group, the new society. The church is the fulfillment of what Israel foreshadowed. All that God intends to do through Christ will be brought into reality through the work of the Spirit in God's people, the church. The church then is the locus, the realm in which God has begun the work of restoring people in the image of God in all righteousness and justice and

We are reconciled to God (v.4-10)

⁴ But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, ⁵ even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— ⁶ and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷ so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. ⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

¹⁰ For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

God through His great grace and mercy satisfied His justice and saved us.

God through the regenerating work of the Spirit made us alive in Christ.

God created us in Christ for good works in this world and in the world to come.

All of this was to highlight the centrality of Christ, bringing Him all the glory.

We are reunited to one another (v.11-16)

In the church, all of the old creation, in the world distinctions are no longer to be divisions. What God has purposed as ways to distinguish humanity may still exist but is never ever to divide believers.

The reversal of the Jew and Gentile divide (v.11-13)

¹¹ Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called "the uncircumcision" by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands— ¹² remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to

the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.
¹³ But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

The division between the Jew and Gentile are now ended in the church.

The restored humanity is within the Body of Christ (v.14-16)

¹⁴ For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility ¹⁵ by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, ¹⁶ and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.

Now, Christians are one new man, one new humanity. What was lost in the fall and curse and rise of sin, is now restored. We are one new man regardless of our background, heritage, ethnicity, gender, financial status, station in life.

True equality is only achieved in the church so that Biblical justice must be exercised by the church.

By the preaching of the Gospel (v.17-22)

¹⁷ And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. ¹⁸ For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. ¹⁹ So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, ²⁰ built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, ²¹ in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. ²² In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

Notice what God has done. He has used the old infrastructures of nation, temple and household and, while maintaining them, has built something new. Rather than the destruction of those institutions, in the church they reach their full realization. Therefore, the church must preach the gospel. Evangelism, not social action, is how the oppression of people will be reversed.

The Responsibility of the Church

Since these are true, what is the responsibility of the church?

To allow no social divisions (Colossians 3:5-17)

⁵ Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. ⁶ On account of these the wrath of God is coming. ⁷ In these you too once walked, when you were living in them. ⁸ But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. ⁹ Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices ¹⁰ and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. ¹¹ Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.

¹² Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, ¹³ bearing with one another and, if

one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. ¹⁴ And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. ¹⁵ And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. ¹⁶ Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. ¹⁷ And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Again notice the “new self” which is part of being “in Christ”. Christ being all for the church and in all in the church means the social distinctions have no place in the church. What is sought through social justice is the already and not yet reality of the church. This reality is to be maintained, not by law, but by love. Our experience and expression of this unity is motivated, maintained and measured by love.

To not allow personality divisions

1 Corinthians 1:9-17

⁹ God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

¹⁰ I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment. ¹¹ For it has been reported to me by Chloe’s people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers. ¹² What I mean is that each one of you says, “I follow Paul,” or “I follow Apollos,” or “I follow Cephas,” or “I follow Christ.” ¹³ Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? ¹⁴ I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, ¹⁵ so that no one may say that you were baptized in my name. ¹⁶ (I did baptize also the household of Stephanas. Beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.) ¹⁷ For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.

1 Corinthians 3:1-9

3 But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. ² I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready, ³ for you are still of the flesh. For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way? ⁴ For when one says, “I follow Paul,” and another, “I follow Apollos,” are you not being merely human?

⁵ What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. ⁶ I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. ⁷ So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. ⁸ He who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his wages according to his labor. ⁹ For we are God’s fellow workers. You are God’s field, God’s building.

It is childish and fleshly to divide over whom we admire and, even worse, whom we follow. Yes, we have many pastors, writers and theologians who have profited us. That

is a good thing. But when you will separate from other believers corporately and individually because you are “in someone’s camp”, you sin. This is the thinking of worldly and fleshly and childish Christians. On the other side, to fail to recognize, mark out and denounce those who teach and practice error is also wrong and sinful. It is sometimes hard to maintain a Biblical balance. But somehow, we have to profit from good teaching, not divide ourselves up by whom we follow and be faithful to confront error, even when it is taught by popular people.

Reflect and Respond

People treat each other the way they do because of sinful beliefs and wicked desires in the heart. The problem is not race, gender, color of skin, country of origin. The problem is deep rooted sin in the heart that causes sins like hatred, violence, stealing, destruction, murder. This is true whether you have black skin or a blue uniform. If what you do is evil, it is not your past history or your present circumstances that is causing it. It may be the occasion for it, the temptation to it, the provocation. But evil acts come from hearts that are refusing to love God and love neighbor.

What is common and normal in the world should not even exist in the church. Yet, from the very beginning of the New Testament church, sinful, evil beliefs and wants have ruled people’s hearts so that there were sinful, evil and unjust distinctions and divisions.

We must be ever watchful for the importation of ideas, beliefs and rules that come from the world. We must also recognize that we tend to read our Bibles through our own lenses, frameworks, and experiences. This should cause us to be discerning and careful while also being humble and teachable.

Be very careful how the Bible is being handled by those advocating for some aspects of the social justice movement. In my reading of the four or five most popular authors on this subject, I have observed that they justify many ideas from the Mosaic Law. This is because they are classical Covenant Theologians. While the Old Testament commands to Israel may give us some wisdom, they do not constitute the unchanging moral will of God nor are they binding on the church. The only binding commands for the church is the Law of Christ in the New Covenant.

We will not sin against God nor against our Christian brothers and sisters by treating them with bias, prejudice, or partiality in our thoughts or in our actions. In love, we will promote peace, harmony, unity, care, and financial provision where needed without distinction.

We will not be persuaded or intimidated by the world’s philosophies even if it is being promoted by popular preachers. We will reject their importation into this church. We will not repent of sins we did not commit. We will not pay the supposed debt of reparations we do not owe.

As Christians who are salt and light in the world, “As we have opportunity, we will do good to everyone, but especially those who are of the household of faith.” (Galatians 6:10)

We will be ever mindful, as God’s redeemed people, of Romans 12:2.

² Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.