

MISSION AS LIBERATION

2. JUSTICE AT THE HEART OF GOD AND MISSION

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The very centre of my faith is that God is love. And justice is love expressed through social structures. That is, to do justice is to love others by being fair and treating them properly. We need to be fair in our rules. We need to be fair in our principles, our policies and our practices. And we need to be fair in our institutions, that is, our courts, our police, our tax departments, our education system. The reason for being fair is to make sure people are treated well and not badly.

So my passion for justice comes from my passion to love as God does. Every time I hear about a child who will die because she is starving in Africa, my heart breaks because I'm sure God's heart breaks. Back in Australia, every time I talk to a friend of mine who was mistreated by the welfare system and the police, my heart breaks and I get angry on their behalf. When I read that in many countries people can't peacefully practise their faith, and are often thrown into prison and tortured, my passion for justice is kindled.

I have a deep feeling that the world is not OK. This makes life terrible for so many people, day after day. How can I proclaim God as loving parent in an unjust world? As liberation theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez puts it, 'What can it mean to tell a non-person that he or she is God's child?'.¹

1. JUSTICE IS AN IMPORTANT PART OF MISSION: A NEW CONSENSUS IN MISSIOLOGY

An encouraging trend in missiology is that nearly every part of the worldwide church understands the gospel to include justice as part of holistic mission. We now recognise that the gospel has social and political dimensions. We now see that justice is a central theme in the Bible. We finally understand that God takes a special interest in the poor and powerless. We can see that there is a need not only for personal transformation but also social transformation. And the gospel includes social transformation.

Evangelicals have seen this only in the last forty years or so, since the first Lausanne Congress on World Evangelisation in 1974, sponsored by the Billy Graham Organisation. Recently Pentecostals and charismatic groups have agreed as well.² The ecumenical movement, in the World Council of Churches, has understood the social dimension of the gospel since it got organised just after the Second World War. Roman Catholics began to take justice seriously during the Second Vatican Council in the sixties and the emergence of liberation theology in the seventies. The women's movement has reminded us that justice for women is biblical, despite the way the church has treated them. There have been Christian heroes in the last fifty years who have kept reminding us that God wants justice for those who are excluded or

¹ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *The power of the poor in history* (London: SCM, 1983), 57.

² , 112-117.

forgotten: Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King, Desmond Tutu, Nelson Mandela, Oscar Romero, and of course thousands of others who are not as famous.

I remember visiting Anglican evangelical missiologist Chris Sugden in Oxford in 1998. I said to him, 'Do you get discouraged writing about holistic mission all the time when most evangelicals in the west seem to concentrate on evangelism and not justice?' He said, 'No, the places where the church is alive and growing are in Africa, Asia and Latin America, and there Christians take holistic mission for granted. It's only in the west, where the church is dying, that people still try to separate justice and evangelism. I'm interested in where there's life.'

2. WHAT IS JUSTICE?

Justice is based on the idea of being fair. Most cultures value justice highly, at least in theory, even if actual governments fall a long way short of it.

The Greek philosopher Aristotle said it means treating everyone equally unless there's a good reason not to. His definition is still useful. It means that unless you can point to a relevant reason why someone should be treated differently, whether better or worse, you should treat people the same. The law is supposed to be just. Ideally it is supposed to treat a prime minister the same way as a common person is treated.

Now the real arguments comes when we ask what are 'relevant reasons for treating people differently'. In South Africa until recently, being black was considered a reason for being banned from being in certain areas, holding certain jobs and using certain facilities. Is that a good enough reason? The world said No, but the South African government said Yes.

I'm sure you can think of situations where people are denied rights quite unfairly, singled out because they belong to a particular ethnic group, or a religion, or a political party. The reason talk of human rights is important is that it begins with the rights of everyone and challenges governments which remove those rights.

In general language justice has several dimensions. There is first of all a **fair exchange**. A boss has a right to expect a fair day's work, but the workers have a right to a fair wage and fair conditions.

Secondly, there is a **fair share** of the wealth of society. Sometimes as a society we have the power to give everyone a roof, education, clean water, enough food and basic health care. But only some get it. Greed leads the rich to hold onto their wealth while their brothers and sisters starve. Jesus saw this as a serious sin.

Thirdly, there is a **fair share of power**. People have the right to take part, to choose governments, to have a voice in where their society is going.

Question:

Every government says it is in favour of justice, but every government fails to make sure that justice is done. What are some examples of unjust behaviour by leaders, governments and armies?

The biblical idea of justice is even richer than these three things: a fair exchange, a fair share and a fair say. God's justice is merciful, active and sets people right. Let's look briefly at the biblical picture of God's mission for justice.

3. SOME BIBLICAL JUSTICE THEMES

There is so much in the Bible about justice—the poor, money, possessions, how to treat others and so on—that it would be a huge job to go through it. So I'm going to just mention a few themes. I hope you will have heard of them and you can see how they connect justice and mission.

a. God is Just

In the Hebrew Bible God is often seen as a just God, that is, fair. To take just two passages:

In Moses' song in Deuteronomy 32:4 we read:

The Lord is your mighty defender,
Perfect and just in all his ways.
Your God is faithful and true;
He does what is right and fair.

In Psalm 9:8–9:

He rules the world with righteousness;
He judges the nations with justice.
The Lord is a refuge for the oppressed,
A place of safety in times of trouble.

Eighty-six times the two words for 'justice' (*mishpat*) and 'righteousness' (*sedeqah*) occur as pairs in the Hebrew Bible.³ God's justice is active. It sets things right. It defends the poor.

David Sheppard puts it well:

Old Testament *sedeqah* topples over on behalf of those in direct need. This justice is not the same as fairness, as though everyone started from the same line. It is not portrayed by the blind-eyed Goddess of Justice. ... In the Bible the righteous God is not blind; his eyes are wide open. Because he is against sin, which distorts relationships between his children, he pushes away the oppressor and is active on behalf of those in special need. He sees the need of widows, orphans, foreigners, the oppressed and he acts for them.⁴

³ They're listed in José Porfirio Miranda, *Marx and the Bible: A critique of the philosophy of oppression* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1974), 93-94, 107; and also in Waldron Scott, *Bring forth justice: A contemporary perspective on mission* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 49.

⁴ David Sheppard, *Bias to the poor* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1983); cited in Alan Nichols, *Reluctant conscience: Closing the gap between the gospel and reality in Australia* (Melbourne: Dove, 1984), 55-56.

b. In the Exodus God Liberates the Oppressed Israelites

The Exodus was a central part of Israelite identity. It was always a political liberation. God acted on behalf of the weak and oppressed. Listen to the words of God's call to Moses in Exodus 3:7-8:

Then the Lord said, 'I have seen how cruelly my people are being treated in Egypt; I have heard them cry out to be rescued from their slave drivers. I know all about their sufferings, and so I have come down to rescue them from the Egyptians and bring them out of Egypt to a fertile and spacious land.'

Later the prophets reminded Israel that God didn't free them because they deserved it but because they were small and weak. It was God's mission to correct the scales of justice.

One example is Ezekiel 34:27:

When I break my people's chains and set them free from those who made them slaves, then they will know that I am the Lord.

c. The Jubilee Radically Protects the Landless and the Slaves

In Leviticus 25 there are some remarkable laws, so radical that scholars don't know if they were ever carried out. Every fifty years land was to be returned to its original owner and slaves were to be freed. It was a radical way of keeping land ownership equal.

We have here a justice based on pure grace, not merit. It is a redistribution that allows new beginnings. God's forgiveness to us involves the cancelling of debts between ourselves.

Remember that in Luke 4 Jesus saw himself as fulfilling the Jubilee promise in Is 61:1. 'I've come to bring good news to the poor', he said, 'and this will be the beginning of a new era God's radical justice'.

d. Other Jewish Laws Protect the Weak and the Foreigner

There were some very just laws in the Jewish Torah. You had to let the poor take the left-over grain in the field when you harvested (Lev 19:10). You had to treat the foreigner fairly (Ex 22:21-24). (We are forgetting this in Australia today, as we turn away desperate refugees in leaky boats.) You could not charge interest (Ex 22:25-27). You had to pay a person for their work on the same day so they could eat (Deut 14:14-15). And so on. And why? 'Because I am the Lord your God' (Lev 19:10).

e. The Prophets Said That True Worship Is Seeking Justice

The prophets again and again tell us that God does not want lots of singing and worship if we are not seeking justice.

For example, in Isaiah 58:6–8, God says:

The kind of fasting I want is this: Remove the chains of oppression and the yoke of injustice, and let the oppressed go free. Share your food with the hungry and open your homes to the homeless poor. Give clothes to those who have nothing to wear, and do not refuse to help your own relatives. Then my favour will shine on you like the morning sun.

f. Jesus Was Poor and Lived With the Poor

A poor man himself, Jesus was friends with the poor. Although he ate in the houses of rich people, he often criticised them sharply.

g. Jesus Proclaimed an Upside-down Kingdom

Jesus made the kingdom of God the centre of his teaching. It is upside-down. The outsiders will be the insiders. The poor are blessed while the wealthy struggle to know God's presence. Children and prostitutes are more welcome than religious leaders. The first are last. People give away instead of getting more. Leaders are servants. And so on.⁵

h. As We Care for Prisoners and the Poor We Care for Christ

In Matthew 25:31–46 Jesus makes it clear that we are to defend and care for the poor not just because they need it but because God identifies with them. As we serve them we serve Christ himself. Seeking justice is at the heart of serving God. The Christ-figure in the story says this:

'I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me ... Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.' (Mt 25:35, 36, 40)

i. Paul's Emphasis on 'Being Made Right with God' Involves Justice

People often say that Paul only talked about being restored to God through faith, being 'given righteousness'. But 'righteousness' and 'justice' are overlapping words, and half the time we translate the Greek word (*dikaioisune*) as 'righteousness' it should be justice. Take, for example, the famous English Bible translation, the King James Version. Not once does it translate the word as 'justice'.⁶

⁵ Donald B Kraybill, *The upside-down kingdom*, 3rd ed. (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 2003).

⁶ Sidney Rooy, 'Righteousness and justice', *Evangelical Review of Theology* 6 (1982): 260.

Here is just one example of what Paul means by being made righteous or just. What does being saved by faith mean? Galatians 3:28 tells us that we are equal before God.

There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.
(Gal 3:28).

This solidarity, this equality before God, is the foundation of human rights — no-one is higher or lower; we all have status before God.

I could go on much longer. It is clear from this list that God is seen in the Bible as the source of justice and mercy. God is just and merciful by very nature. God liberates the poor. We are called to worship God by seeking justice. God's kingdom is one of grace, where the poor are given a place of honour.

Given this biblical emphasis, it's not surprising to hear the statement of the radical group at the evangelical congress at Lausanne in 1974, summing up God's Good News:

It is Good News of liberation, of restoration, of wholeness, and of salvation that is personal, social, global and cosmic.⁷

They were not saying that mission is only social action. They said that mission is witnessing to a total liberation of humanity, with both spiritual and material dimensions. They said that social transformation does not just follow the gospel but is part of the gospel. A transformed society is part of the kingdom of God. We can't make it happen by ourselves. But we can co-operate with God's liberating purposes.

As David Bosch puts it, 'evangelism cannot be divorced from the preaching and practising of justice'.⁸ As we call people to repent and be converted, part of what we are calling them to is to join God's mission, to work for justice and reconciliation, to commit themselves to the full humanity of all people.

Question:

In the light of our definition of justice and our summary of justice in the Bible, what are some of the features of a just society? Be specific, e.g., The rich pay a higher percentage of income in tax. Every child gets 12 yrs of free education.

4. LIBERATION THEOLOGIES

The recovery of justice in mission is largely due to liberation theology. And liberation theologies are still on the leading edge of missiology. So I'd like to look briefly at what liberation theologies are and what changes they are bringing to missiology. My

⁷ 'Theology and implications of radical discipleship', in *Let the earth hear his voice: International Congress on World Evangelization, Lausanne, Switzerland*, ed. J D Douglas (Minneapolis: World Wide, 1975), available at <http://www.lausanne.org/docs/lau1docs/1294.pdf>, 1294.

⁸ David J Bosch, *Transforming mission: Paradigm shifts in theology of mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991), 418.

understanding of mission has been changed deeply by liberation theology, and it has affected where I live, who are my friends and how I teach theology.

a. What Are Liberation Theologies?

'Liberation theology' is a label for certain action-oriented theologies. They strongly emphasise freedom from any type of human oppression, whether social, economic, political, racial or sexual.⁹

Its main forms today are those concerned with the liberation of women, oppressed minorities (such as black or indigenous theology) and the poor in Latin America, Asia and Africa. It includes dalit theology in India and minjung theology in Korea. Latin American liberation theology has been the most famous since its beginnings in the 1960s, but each member of the family of liberation theologies is different.

b. How Do They Differ from Traditional Theologies?

Liberation theology is different from the traditional model of theology, which has been carried on mainly by white western males in a European or American context. Let's consider five ways in which liberation theology is different.¹⁰

i. A Different Starting Point: The Poor

Where do we start our theology? Some start from nature and argue that there is a God. Others start from the Bible and apply it to our situation. Liberation theology starts by hearing the cry of the poor.¹¹ It comes to God with questions about why people's lives are lived in misery. The question is not whether God exists, but whether God can change things.

ii. A Different Orientation: Liberation of the Oppressed

Liberation theology views salvation as liberation for all humanity. But it focuses on what that might mean for the oppressed. Liberation theologians want a theology that grows out of action for humans who are crying out in desperation and poverty and oppression. This is a new orientation.

iii. A Different Set of Tools: The Social Sciences

Liberation theology, having started by hearing the cry of the poor, then analyses society. It asks: Why are people poor? Why do Third World countries go further into debt? What are the structures of oppression under which the poor live? It uses both theology and the social sciences to answer these questions. The social sciences it uses most are economics and sociology.

⁹Deane William Ferm, *Third world liberation theologies: An introductory survey* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1986), 1; Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff, *Introducing liberation theology* (Tunbridge Wells, UK: Burns & Oates, 1987), 28-29.

¹⁰I'm using headings from Robert McAfee Brown, *Theology in a new key: Responding to liberation themes* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978)

¹¹To use Frederick Herzog's phrase, cited in Brown, *Theology in a new key*, 61.

iv. A Different Method: Reflection on Praxis

'Praxis' once meant simply 'practice', the opposite of theory. Karl Marx made it mean more. He believed that philosophy mustn't just try to *see* the world correctly, as it is; it must try to *change* it. How? By praxis.

For Marx praxis meant reflective engagement in the world in transforming, humanising action. That is, a combination of thinking and acting for good. It involves a rhythm of action and reflection, a never-ending circle of action stimulating critical reflection which in turn leads to new action.¹²

Theology, and in our case, missiology, is seen by Gutiérrez as 'critical reflection on praxis'.¹³ Theology is the second step, only to be taken after we commit ourselves to solidarity with the poor.

It can be very uncomfortable to put praxis at the centre of theological method. American black liberation theologian James Cone once came to Australia and spoke at a conference I was at. He told us that unless theology was being done by people alongside the poor then it was not theology. He looked at the audience, who were mostly middle-aged, middle-class, white, male, professional theologians, and said, 'There's obviously not much theology being done by this group!'

v. A Different Hermeneutical Model: Suspicion of All Ideologies

Hermeneutics is about interpreting scripture and doing theology. It's how we 'read' things. Liberation theologies read things differently, with the eyes of the poor.

Ideology is a body of doctrine. It is usually a negative word. It means the system of beliefs by which dominant groups cover their self-interest with rationalisations. In simple terms ideology is usually a web of half-truths spun by the powerful to make the world look the way they say it is. Theology, as much as any other system, is always tainted by ideology.

According to liberation theologians, theology ought to help us go beyond our ideologies. It ought to expose our bias. It ought to make us aware that we come to scripture already wearing certain sorts of glasses and that these can make us blind to gospel truth. Having uncovered our ideological biases, we then re-interpret the scriptures from the new perspective of the poor.

Juan Segundo has four steps for seeing the world with new eyes, the eyes of the poor.

¹²Many authors define praxis. See especially Brown, *Theology in a new key*, 70-72; or Allan W Loy, 'Praxis: Karl Marx's challenge to Christian theology', *St Mark's Review* No. 113 (Mar 1983): 8-11.

¹³Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A theology of liberation: History, politics and salvation*, Rev. ed. (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995), 6, 11.

1. Experience Alongside the Poor

First we actually get alongside the poor and experience reality 'from the underside'. It creates in us an 'ideological suspicion'. In other words, when we listen to traditional theology, our response from the slums of Latin America is 'I doubt it very much!', or 'You are not talking sense to me'.

2. Questioning, Analysis and Evaluation

We apply our suspicion to the whole ideology (that is, to the whole theology), questioning, analysing and exposing it.

3. Re-thinking the Bible and Tradition

We bring this suspicion to our interpretation of the Bible. Segundo calls it 'hermeneutical suspicion'. Why do scholars always work so hard to spiritualise the biblical passages on the poor? Why does the King James Version always translate the word for justice as righteousness? Would it have anything to do with the fact that the translation was paid for by a king? Why has the church ignored Mary's Song of Praise in Luke 1, about the overthrow of the rich and the exaltation of the poor? Would it be because the church was enjoying power itself?

4. Re-location (Seeing Things from a New Position)

Finally we end up with our new interpretation of the Bible, using important facts and themes which were previously neglected. What we see depends largely on where we're standing. From our new location, we begin the process again.¹⁴

These four steps can be repeated, and each time we can learn more. Segundo calls it the 'hermeneutical circle of suspicion'.

5. MISSION FOR SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

a. Liberation Theology Challenges Us Deeply

I find no way to avoid the challenge that liberation theologies put to us. Take indigenous theology as an example. In Australia, white people have stolen the land and are still oppressing the Aborigines, the Australian indigenous people. In many countries, such as your own, indigenous groups fight for independence are their voices are not heard. In fact, they are treated brutally and unjustly. What will Christian mission say to these people? Will we proclaim in hope that God has heard their cry?

I can also no longer practise my faith without fighting the oppression of women in churches, in our homes and in society. It is the gospel which compels me to preach the liberation of women so that they have equal opportunities in all areas of society.

¹⁴Gutiérrez, *A theology of liberation*, 9.

In a small way I have moved to live amongst the poor in my own society. My wife and I, twenty-five years ago, chose the poorest suburb in Melbourne and moved there. We have put down our roots there. We sent our children to the local schools, which were not very good, and we campaigned for better schools, alongside other parents. I am still a very privileged person, and I don't claim to be poor, but liberation theology has set me on a downward journey in social terms, towards simplicity and solidarity.

b. Both Welfare and Justice

I'd like to say something on the relationship between various types of social concern. There is a spectrum between individual acts of care for a person ('a cup of cold water given in Christ's name', Matthew 10:42) and, say, revolutionary action to overthrow a government.

Down one end is love for neighbour shown to individuals: a food parcel, a bed for the night, giving money to a beggar. This could be called charity, social service, welfare, alms-giving. The emphasis is on face-to-face service, and on meeting needs as they arise. This is very important work. It's a work of mercy, responding from the heart at the personal level.

Towards the other end is social action, justice seeking, political action and action for structural change. This is what I call 'structural love'. It seeks to change policies, start programs, change laws, protect rights, encourage spending on education, health, housing, disability, employment and so on. This work focuses on groups rather than individuals. It is complicated and takes years. It usually means working with other groups to achieve something. It sometimes requires supporting one political party rather than another.

Mission requires the church to do both. We need to respond to desperate need. Emergency relief has its place. But we also need to work against the policies which create the need.

Some of us are better at one or the other. But between us all, we need to include both welfare and justice in the mission of the people of God.

c. Ways of Seeking Justice

i. 'Salt': Influencing Society Quietly and Constructively

Every time we provide education for those who wouldn't normally get it, we are promoting justice. Every time we work within the structures of society to provide a needed service to a disadvantaged group, we are working for justice. In our jobs, in our Christian ministry, as we open doors to others and treat them fairly, we build justice.

ii. 'Light': Speaking Prophetically Against Injustice

Some situations demand that we protest against what is happening. In my society I am free to attend rallies against the World Trade Organisation, and I have done so. In my country I am free to write

letters to newspapers and to politicians. The Baptist Union passes resolutions on social and moral issues. All the churches in Australia have called on the government to treat refugees better. All the churches have called on the government to seek reconciliation with the indigenous people, whose land we took two hundred years ago.

I recognise that it is not always possible to speak openly.

iii. In an Authoritarian Political Context?

I hesitate to give advice about ways of seeking justice in a society where there is little democracy and there are regular violations of human rights. But here are some suggestions; I don't know if they are useful:

1. Keep appealing to the higher values of the ruling regime.

If they say they want education for all, remind them of that goal. The same with working towards democracy, holding free and fair elections, treating all minorities equally, and all religions, and welcoming international contact.

2. Never give in on defending human dignity and good government.

Human rights are not just a western notion, but are universal. Continue to critique abuse of power and corruption

3. Support both those who go to jail and those who work within constraints.

We must resist being divided along the lines of how radical or careful we are. There are both outspoken leaders and 'behind-the-scenes' leaders, and the struggle for justice needs both.

4. Keep telling the story to the worldwide church.

International pressure is a significant factor in changing governments that oppress. The world must be told about what is happening.

d. Never Wedded to One Party or Program

Christians need to be committed to practical action, and yet continually critique of all practical action in the name of the Kingdom of God. We have to be both activists and idealists. We may be political party members but we must not worship the political party. In Nicaragua the Christian members of the socialist Sandinista movement were praised for their hard work in getting the Sandinistas into power in about 1980. But then they were internal critics of the Sandinista government, as it became inefficient and occasionally corrupt. They were first Christians and second Sandinistas.

e. Still Aspiring to Holistic Mission

The ideal form of mission is holistic. That is, it integrates both word and deed, evangelism and social action. But some of us will be better than others at various forms of mission, and we need to encourage each other, and ensure that taken as a whole church we manage a holistic approach.

Love of neighbour stands on its own two feet as part of mission. We are sent, among other things, to love our neighbours as ourselves (Mt 19:19). There is no need for an evangelistic motive for us to be involved in welfare or justice. The church I'm part of has started several projects which have contributed to the health of the local community but which now run on their own as projects of the wider community. They don't all have stay 'Christian'. To see community development as a hook for dragging people into the church is a less than noble motive. Expressing God's love to others is simply a part of the kingdom of God; it is part of what living under God's gracious rule means.

But overall we need to beware that our mission is not all limited to the work of social transformation. This is just one of the many dimensions of the good news. There is a strong link between conversion and justice. We bear the good news *of Jesus Christ*, with its social implications. We do not bear the news that society can get better if we work at it. That would be the social gospel, not the whole gospel.

So, although we mustn't expect every mission project, whether here or overseas, to be holistic in itself, we should aspire to our church's programs *in total* expressing a holistic mission.

Question:

What are some of the things the church in Myanmar is doing or can do to campaign for justice?