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## Reflections on Social Justice

By Darrow Miller, Scott Allen, and Gary Brumbelow

The phrase “social justice” has become quite popular within evangelical circles in the past few years. But what exactly do people mean when they use this phrase? For many, it is simply another way of saying “serving the poor.” For others, it carries with it an implicit approach to poverty fighting—one defined by involuntary resource redistribution and unbiblical notions of equality. Indeed, many people, including many Christians, equate these ideas.

The three of us are deeply concerned about issues of poverty and development. God commands us to be concerned for the plight of the poor and needy. We are to be generous, openhanded, and compassionate. But the Bible also provides a framework, or a worldview, in which we must do this work of service. This worldview takes into account the nature of God as the creator and the source of objective reality. It is based on a biblical understanding of man and his unique qualities and position within creation as *Imago Dei*—made in God’s image. It is founded on God’s eternal laws, both in creation as well as the moral law summarized in the Ten Commandments. Only within this framework will the means and methods of serving the poor be God-honoring and helpful. The implications and approaches to poverty fighting within a Biblical framework were explored by Darrow in his 1997 book, *Discipling Nations: the Power of Truth to Transform Culture*.

Last year, we were approached by John Stonestreet, director of Summit Ministries and the Colson Center for Christian Worldview, to see if we had any material related to the topic of Social Justice from the basis of a biblical worldview. John works with young Christians around the country and observed that many were captivated by the concept of social justice. Yet he was concerned that in the process, many were being influenced by a host of assumptions whose origin is atheistic rather than Biblical. This conversation

is part of what spurred us to write a series of blogs at [www.darrowmillerandfriends.com](http://www.darrowmillerandfriends.com) on social justice. This paper is a compilation of those posts, and we share it with hopes that it will help Christians think critically and Biblically about this important topic.

### *First, Define the Terms*

Many young Christians care about social justice. They believe Christ followers should be concerned with the poor, with the care of creation, and other political, economic, and social issues. They see in the Bible God calling his people to feed the poor, clothe the naked, shelter the homeless, and seek justice in the public square and the marketplace.

Admonitions in both testaments provide the motivation and the context for our engagement in social justice. Here are some examples from the Old Testament:

- Zechariah 7:9-10 – *This is what the LORD Almighty said: “Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another. Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the foreigner or the poor. Do not plot evil against each other.”*
- Isaiah 1:17 – *Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow.*
- Psalm 82:3 – *Defend the weak and the fatherless; uphold the cause of the poor and the oppressed.*
- Micah 6:8 – *He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.*

Similarly, the New Testament makes social justice a major thrust of the expansion of the kingdom of God. Jesus calls us to love our neighbor as we love ourselves.

*Matt 22:37-39 – 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.’”*

He also reminds us that when he returns he will sit on his throne and separate the sheep from the goats based on how we had treated those in need.

*Matthew 25:34-40 – Then the King will say to those on his right, “Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. 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."*

Likewise the Apostle Paul implores us to have the mind of Christ.

*Phil. 2:3-4 – Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.*

Many young Christians read these passages and wonder how their fathers could miss something so obvious. How could their predecessors be so consumed with "spiritual salvation" and so unconcerned for the cultural mandate and "thy kingdom come"? Writing in *Of Other Worlds: Essays and Stories*, C.S. Lewis speaks of the church's culpability:

*But it did not happen, however, without sins on our parts: for that justice and that care for the poor which (most mendaciously) the Communists advertise, we in reality ought to have brought about ages ago. But far from it: we Westerners preached Christ with our lips. With our actions we brought slavery of Mammon. We are more guilty than the infidels: for to those that know the will of God and do it not, the greater the punishment.<sup>1</sup>*

The question is not *Should Christians engage in social justice?* The question is *How can we best ensure that justice flourishes in all areas of life – economic, political, social, et al?*

Before we proceed, let's establish a definition. "Social justice" refers to justice in the social arena. The two words to be examined (from Webster's 1828 dictionary) are:

**Justice** *n.* [L. *justitia*, from *justus*, *just*.] *The virtue which consists in giving to everyone what is his due; practical conformity to the laws and to principles of rectitude in the dealings of men with each other; honesty; integrity in commerce or mutual intercourse. Justice is distributive or commutative. Distributive justice belongs to magistrates or rulers, and consists in distributing to every man that right or equity which the laws and the principles of equity require; or in deciding controversies according to the laws and to principles of equity. Commutative justice consists in fair dealing in trade and mutual intercourse between man and man.*

**Social:** *a.* [L. *socialis*, from *socius*, *companion*.] *Pertaining to society; relating to men living in society, or to the public as an aggregate body; as social interests or concerns;*

*social pleasures; social benefits; social happiness; social duties. True self-love and social are the same.*

Note that in the social realm there are two elements of *distributive justice* - that granted by the government which renders equity to each citizen and equality before the law, and *commutative justice* - that granted in the market place through free and fair exchange between people. This is “social” justice in that it deals with justice in the community, between citizens and their neighbors.

Catholic economist and theologian Michael Novak writes, “Social Justice is the capacity to organize with others to accomplish certain ends for the good of the whole community.”<sup>2</sup> He continues,

*Social justice is a virtue, a habit that people internalize and learn, a capacity. Its capacity has two sides: first, a capacity to organize with others to accomplish particular ends and second, ends that are extra-familial. They’re for the good of the neighborhood, or the village, or the town, or the state, or the country, or the world.... [It] is the new order of the ages.<sup>3</sup>*

Justice is a product of kingdom culture; it is doing what is good and right toward others as well as righting the wrongs that have been done to people.

Udo Middelmann, President of the Francis A. Schaeffer Foundation offers this helpful summary of the nature of Social Justice:

*Social Justice is not a euphemism for Socialism with its disregard for personal effort, nor coercion by a state to reach equality of outcome. **Justice requires the pursuit of fairness towards people, situations and genuine possibilities. A social dimension lies in the fact that we are not alone and should bear each other’s burdens, whether they are educational, emotional, financial or spiritual/intellectual.** Social justice addresses issues of human rights not by governmental attribution, but owned by nature of being people in the image of God, who intended a fuller life, greater knowledge and genuine responsibility for people.<sup>4</sup>*

***Where did the term “social justice” come from?***

The phrase “social justice,” while not found in scripture, is clearly rooted in the Biblical cosmology and narrative. But where did the term originate?

From its inception in the Bible, the concept of social justice travels through Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas wrote of *general justice*, i.e. that a citizen has an interest not only in his

own welfare, but also in the welfare of others: “Now the virtue of a good citizen is general justice, whereby a man is directed to the common good” (*Summa Theologica*).

In 1840, the Italian Jesuit scholar Luigi Taparelli D’Azeglio, co-founder of the theological journal *Civiltà Cattolica* appropriated Aquinas’s concept of general justice to coin the term *social justice*. Taparelli was writing in response to the massive changes in society brought on by the industrial revolution. Dr. Ryan Messmore, the William E. Simon Fellow in Religion and a Free Society at the Heritage Foundation, writes of Taparelli:

*His vision of social justice, then, emphasized freedom and respect for human beings and the small institutions through which they pursue basic needs. He held that true justice can’t be achieved without doing justice to our social nature and natural forms of association. Social justice entailed a social order in which government doesn’t overrun or crowd out institutions of civil society such as family, church and local organizations. Rather, they are respected, protected, and allowed to flourish [emphasis Messmore’s].<sup>5</sup>*

In 1892, Pope Leo XIII’s social encyclical, *Rerum Novarum*, built on Taparelli’s argument. Michael Novak describes this unfolding in his essay, “Social Justice: Not What You Think It Is.”

Social justice had a very different meaning for Aquinas, Taparelli, and Pope Leo XIII than it does for many today. The Western worldview has eroded, and as a culture’s worldview changes, so does its language.

For example, in the language of Judeo-Christian culture, a woman carried a “baby” in her womb. In today’s atheistic paradigm, the unborn baby is a “product of conception.” In the West’s historic paradigm, marriage was a covenantal relationship between a man and woman, before God, for life. Today the word is being redefined in post-modern terms to be a temporary relationship between two consenting adults. So it is with the term “social justice.” When Europe and North America shifted from the Judeo-Christian worldview to an atheist-materialist worldview, the term was deformed from its original, nobler meaning to the one in use today.

How this narrative unfolded is treated later in this paper. Here we simply note that the modern usage is code for statist solutions to poverty. It is associated with Marxist and socialist *zero sum* economic policies. Instead of individuals forming voluntary associations to care for the needs of those in the community, social justice now means the involuntary redistribution of wealth by the state in a misguided effort to manufacture equal outcomes. Needless to say, Christian generosity and compassion is not the same as government-run welfare programs. In scripture, compassion literally

means “to suffer together with another.” It is perfectly demonstrated by Christ who came to suffer together with us in His incarnation, and ultimately to go to the cross on our behalf. Compassion is also demonstrated in the parable of the Good Samaritan, who didn’t just transfer money to help a dying man, but got his hands dirty and suffered together with him. By its very nature compassion cannot be done long distance. Government bureaucrats physically removed from needy people cannot exercise compassion, and yet for many, this is what social justice implies.

### *Is Social Justice About Equality or Equity?*

The goal of some in the social justice discussion is for people to be equal. What does this mean and what does it entail?

The U.S. Declaration of Independence is rooted in a biblical understanding of reality, as is clear from these powerful words that have become the ideological cornerstone of American civilization: “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.”

First note that we are equal, *not because we are the same*, but because we are created by God. Young or old, male or female, black or white, rich or poor, healthy or infirmed, to be human is to be made in the image of God. This fact establishes that before God and our fellow man, each person has dignity and honor and is due respect from their neighbors and society. Being made in the image of God, each person has certain rights granted by God, unalienable rights – they cannot be conferred nor taken away by the state or any human being or institution. These rights include the right to *life, liberty*, and the *pursuit of happiness* (the state of living within the framework of the laws of liberty, established at the creation of the world).

But, aside from equality in dignity and worth, human beings are not born the same. The law of *individuality* makes it clear that every human is unique – one of a kind. In billions of snowflakes, no two are alike. So also, no two human beings are alike. Even identical twins are not truly identical.

Some people were made to play basketball. Others can hardly dribble. Some have been born to sing opera; some should sing only in the shower. We are tall and short, male and female, brown and black, gifted in languages, math, science, music and the arts, sports

and oratory. From a myriad of possibilities, each person is made one of a kind. God loves diversity.

Human beings are equal and diverse at the same time. Human beings, like the Godhead, have unity without uniformity and diversity without superiority.

Equality and equity are very different.

Equity assumes the unique individuality of each person. While people are different, they are to be treated equally before the law; they are to be treated fairly. The uniqueness or diversity of people is a cause for celebration, not discrimination. Equity means equal rights and responsibilities and equal standing before the law, for all citizens. This is a product of freedom. The goal is equity among diverse peoples.

Equality, in contrast, assumes sameness, uniformity, interchangeability. Some advocate for an equal starting place – a level playing field for every citizen. Others argue for equal outcomes – everyone has the same in the end. The uniqueness of individuals is often undervalued. The goal of equality is to make diverse people all the same.

It's easy to see the absurdity of this philosophy. Equality means anyone who wants should be put on the starting line-up of the Los Angeles Lakers. And, at the end of the season, every team in the league should have the same win-loss record as every other team.

Equality, pushed to its natural conclusion, would divide an insulin dose equally between a healthy child and the diabetic child. Equity, on the other hand, gives the diabetic child all the insulin.

Because people are born unique, there will always be diverse starting places and outcomes. The only alternative is tyranny, as C.S. Lewis imagines a demon's instruction in *Screwtape Proposes a Toast*:

*The moral is plain. Allow no preeminence among your subjects. Let no man live who is wiser or better or more famous or even handsomer than the mass. Cut them all down to a level: all slaves, all ciphers, and all nobodies. All equals.<sup>6</sup>*

This was the outcome of the Communist experiment in the Soviet Union and China and the direction of all utopian experiments. People were to dress the same, act the same, and think the same under penalty of death for any deviation.

Equity seeks fairness for diverse people, equality seeks numerically equal outcomes for different people. Equality, in the sense of similar outcomes, contradicts the basic concept

of individuality and human uniqueness. Regarding all humans equal before the law leads to freedom, while forcing a material equality of outcome promotes tyranny.

Social justice as God intended seeks equity, not equality, for a nation's citizens.

### *Why So Much Heat Around Discussions of Social Justice?*

All people of good will—those who have a heart for the poor and vulnerable, who are appalled by the corruption and injustice they see, who are aghast at the slaughtering of females in modern China on the scale of a holocaust, who grieve to watch sex slavery replace black slavery—all such people want to do something to stand for justice.

But how we are to work for social justice. What policies and programs are needed? This is hotly debated. The heat is actually generated, though, at a level much deeper than pragmatic considerations such as policies and programs.

Policies and programs are not suspended in air; they are the logical consequences of principles and paradigms. Our sacred belief systems ultimately determine how we understand the issues of social justice and how those issues are to be solved. The discussions may be at the level of policy and programs, but the people in the discussions get hot under the collar because their sacred belief systems, which they may hold subconsciously, are being challenged.

We need to realize that people who have a heart for social justice may be working from differing paradigms or worldviews. These different paradigms establish very different principles, policies, and programs. What assumptions underlie the sometimes bitter discussions over poverty and social injustice?

A simple diagram shows how Paradigms drive Principles which drive Policies which drive Programs.

Paradigms → Principles → Policies → Programs

To put it differently, politics and economics are downstream from culture and culture is downstream from “cult,” another word for worship. Or, worldview leads to values which shape behavior which drives consequences. The “four P” diagram above is a helpful summary.

The way one defines a problem will determine how one solves the problem. Many may be motivated by compassion to help the poor. They have a worthy goal of reducing and



working to end poverty and injustice. But different paradigms will lead to very different solutions.

Wherever we can, we need to work together. Yet at the same time, we must avoid minimizing real differences in our approach to solving problems of poverty. We need to speak about and treat others who are working with the poor in civil fashion, even when we disagree on how best to solve the problems our communities and nations face.

Most people who speak of social justice do so because they believe the universe has a moral dimension. That is, there is evil in the universe and it manifests itself in three distinct ways: moral evil, natural evil, and institutional evil. It is the responsibility of those who seek justice to fight evil in all its manifestations, to do what is right and oppose what is wrong. Because the universe is moral, we have a responsibility to relate ethically and justly to other human beings and to the creation. We are our brother's keeper! We have a responsibility to steward the creation. We have responsibility for ourselves, our families, and the larger community, including people who are economically and politically marginalized.

To seek justice in a fallen world is not easy, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer's story so powerfully illustrates.

As darkness grew in Europe during the rise of the Third Reich, the young pastor Bonhoeffer understood that the church needed to stand against the injustice being perpetrated on the Jews. He challenged the church to engage on three levels, each more difficult and dangerous than the last.

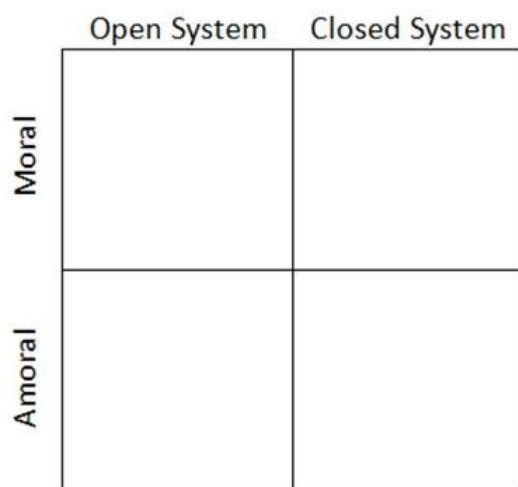
First he called the church to *advocacy* - to speak out on behalf of Jewish people. Second he called the church to *compassion* - to "come alongside in passion [suffering]," opening their communities and homes to shelter and hide the Jews who were being persecuted. The book by Corrie ten Boom and the diary of Anne Frank are testimony to the hardship and cost to those who provided a "hiding place."

Third, Bonhoeffer called the church to live out *justice*, in this case to throw a wrench in the Nazi killing machine. He called the church to stand against the unjust legal authority and do all in her power to stop it. Each successive call found more and more Christians abandoning the cry for justice. And Bonhoeffer ended up paying with his life.

There is much heat in discussions of social justice because it is defined differently by different people, and those differences are rooted in different, often unspoken, ideological commitments and sacred belief systems.

The Bible presents the cosmos as an “open system.” The God of the universe stands outside creation and thus the system is *open* to intervention and to the Creator’s involvement. The universe is also open to the activity of angels, and to *imago Dei* - humans. A “closed system” is the illusion of atheists who assume there is no God, that matter is all there is, and no supernatural beings, no God nor angels, exist to intervene in the closed system of material cause-and-effect. Human beings are simply products of purposeless evolution – cogs in the machine of the universe.

One’s paradigm – open system or a closed system – will determine how social justice is defined, what policies are established, and which programs implemented.



People who argue for social justice occupy the top half of our diagram; they believe that we live in a moral universe and thus we have a responsibility to seek justice. But not all these acknowledge the left column, the open system of reality.

Two of the quadrants in our diagram are self consistent, two are inconsistent. The upper left quadrant is consistent with the reality of God’s existence. We live in a moral universe and an open system. The bottom right quadrant is also consistent. It naturally fits with the atheistic-materialistic assumption that there is no God and thus the universe is a-moral and closed.

Many people with a heart for the poor and the moral motivation to seek justice in the world function from the upper right quadrant. But this quadrant, along with the lower left quadrant, is inherently inconsistent.

Those in the upper right quadrant understand the universe is moral, but they begin their reasoning from a closed-system mentality. This is the socialist position that I (Darrow) held for many years as a young adult. Those who function from a moral framework want to help the poor and seek justice and even to do so sacrificially. But because they consciously or unconsciously function from a closed system of limited resources, their approaches to help the poor are radically different from someone functioning from the theistically consistent quadrant. The table below indicates how our paradigms drive very different principles regarding social justice.

	<b>Judeo-Christian Theism</b>	<b>Atheistic-Materialism</b>
The Universe	<i>Open System</i>	<i>Closed System</i>
Human Beings	The Image of God	Mouths to feed
Resources	Product of human imagination	Physical things in the ground
Economics	Positive Sum	Zero Sum
Nature of equality	Equal before the law	Equal outcomes
Solving poverty	Create wealth	Redistribute scarce resources
Government	Internal self government; the state is responsible to its (free) citizens.	The state must be large enough to force its will on the people
Property	Private	Belongs to the state
Social Justice	Personal and public flourishing	Material equality
Operating Principle	Freedom	Tyranny
Poor People	Individuals in the community	A class that only a large government can help

People who recognize the system as open understand that resources are the product of human imagination and creativity. Wealth may be created. The way to solve the problems of hunger, poverty, and injustice is to create an economic and political environment of freedom where people and communities may flourish – creating and stewarding wealth. This leads to a *positive sum* economic system. The truth is that all human beings are created in the image of God and stand equal before the law. Human creativity and innovation are the source of natural resources. Private property is to be respected. People are free and responsible moral agents who are to practice internal self government, allowing for small state government. Social justice focuses on personal and public flourishing in all areas of life.

People who believe the system is closed think that resources are physical things in the ground and, by nature, limited. Human beings are the product of an evolutionary process, merely animals: mouths and stomachs. More people equal more mouths to feed. In a world of scarce resources the way to solve poverty is by reducing the number of mouths and/or redistributing resources. This leads to a *zero sum* economic system. Social justice is defined as equal outcomes. Only a large government with authority and power to redistribute scarce resources can achieve equal outcomes.

This perspective reduces social justice to a focus on the narrow realm of material poverty. Poor individuals are not seen as neighbors to be provided with care and opportunity. They are rather treated as a class which is encouraged to create docking mechanisms with government programs. This leads to dependence and greater poverty. Thus we end with a modern institution of economic and political slavery in which the well-intended political class gains power and influence over a compliant poor class, the newly dependent slaves.

What we have just described are the two distinct responses – open system vs. closed system – to the moral imperative to work toward social justice. Having said this, it is also important to realize that there are those who, consciously or subconsciously, see the universe as amoral. For these there is no moral imperative to help the poor or to seek justice in any form. These positions are represented by the two lower quadrants of our diagram.

In the lower left quadrant are people who live off a memory that explains how wealth can be created. But by mixing the memory of an open system with an affirmation of an atheistic-materialistic amoral universe they are inconsistent. Their only interest is money. They want to gain as much as they can, as quickly as they can without moral

constraint about how they get it or use it. We may think of these folks as consumer, hedonistic, predatory, or nihilistic “capitalists.” (Capitalist is in quotation marks because what is described here is not capitalism in its true, original form as envisioned by people who affirmed a moral framework for both the creation and sharing of wealth.)

The second group is represented by the lower right quadrant. These are people who function consistently from an atheistic-materialistic perspective. The system is closed, resources are limited, and the universe has no moral constraints. Such people are interested only in power – after all “nature is red in tooth and claw.” There is only one law: the survival of the fittest! The modern eugenics movement was birthed out of these assumptions, as was the Nazi concept of “Lebensunwertes Leben,” or “life unworthy of life.” This included the physically and mentally handicapped as well as those considered racially inferior according to Nazi dogma. Today, these same ideas underpin abortion, forced sterilization, female feticide, and other “population control” efforts around the world.

The first group is not interested in social justice, only in self and the amassing of wealth. The second group cynically uses the term “social justice” to accumulate power. They seek to expand the size of the state or national government to accrue control over the masses. These folks are intentionally creating institutional dependency to accumulate political and economic power for themselves. The result is a modern form of slavery, an economic and political *plantation* where the poor are enslaved in political-economic programs. In contrast to the physical slavery of pre-Civil War U.S., or the apartheid of South Africa, this is a psychological dependency: “We are poor and there is nothing we can do about it. Our masters, the omnipotent government, will secure food and shelter for us.”

### ***A Key Test of Truth: Does it Work?***

One of the greatest challenges to the closed-system approach to social justice is that, in the real world, it nearly always leads to increased injustice and poverty. A key test of whether an idea is true or not is how it plays out in the real world—what does it result in? Simply put, approaches to poverty fighting that are rooted in atheistic, materialistic assumptions lead to many unintended consequences. Conversely, approaches to poverty fighting that align with the true nature of creation and of man can have powerfully positive effects.

Michael Novak, in a recent speech entitled, “Don’t Confuse the Common Good with Statism” made this basic point:

*[Some] seem to think that the way to achieve “social justice,” that is, to help the poor, is to give more money to the state to distribute (or whatever it does with the money, once it flows into Washington’s coffers). [They] equate social justice with turning over to the state the project of “fighting” poverty.*

*Where...is [the] evidence that this dependence on the state actually helps the poor?*

*The 2011 Census Report on Poverty and Income ... displays contrary evidence. After pouring three trillion dollars (going on four trillion) during the last three years, in the name of helping the poor and creating jobs, the federal state’s failure is breathtaking. The ranks of American poor have swollen to the highest number (46.6 million) since poverty figures first began to be recorded, 52 years ago. The percentage of Americans who are poor (14.1 percent, or nearly one in seven) is the highest in seventeen years. Is giving so much of taxpayers’ money to the state helping the poor?*

*... Those who insist that the only (or the best) way to achieve the common good is to give more resources (and more control) to the federal state, had better go looking for some evidence somewhere that undergirds their self-righteousness. They insist that others of us, who do not support the expenditure of more state money, are immoral.*

*Yet the first moral obligation, Blaise Pascal wrote, is to think clearly. And with evidence.*

*What is true for the common good is also true for social justice. Those who insist that the test of social justice is giving more tax revenues to the state need to display their evidence.*

*For myself, a mountain of evidence convinces me that...giving money to the state in order to help the poor is a little like trying to feed the swallows by feeding the horses. The swallows get very little of it.<sup>7</sup>*

It is a great irony that many who champion social justice hold to statist, redistributionist approaches to poverty fighting when the evidence is overwhelming that these approaches harm the poor by fostering a spirit of entitlement and dependency. They reject approaches that have proven wildly successful in lifting millions out of poverty, simply because they don’t align with their core ideological commitments.

What are these approaches that have proven so successful? Consider this from a recent article by Steve Chapman titled “Towards the Conquest of World Poverty.”

*In 1981, 70 percent of those in the developing world subsisted on the equivalent of less than \$2 a day, and 42 percent had to manage with less than \$1 a day. Today, 43 percent are below \$2 a day and 14 percent below \$1.*

*"Poverty reduction of this magnitude is unparalleled in history: Never before have so many people been lifted out of poverty over such a brief period of time," write Brookings Institution researchers Laurence Chandy and Geoffrey Gertz.*

*Just as important as the extent of the improvement is the location: everywhere. In the past there has been improvement in a few countries or a continent. Not this time.*

*China has continued the rapid upward climb it began three decades ago. India, long a laggard, has shaken off its torpor. Latin America has made sharp inroads against poverty. "For the first time since 1981," says the World Bank, "we have seen less than half the population of sub-Saharan Africa living below \$1.25 a day."*

*The start of most global trends is hard to pinpoint. This one, however, had its big bang in the early 1970s, in Chile. After a socialist government brought on economic chaos, the military seized power in a bloody coup and soon embarked on a program of drastic reform -- privatizing state enterprises, fighting inflation, opening up foreign trade and investment and unshackling markets.*

*It was the formula offered by economists associated with the University of Chicago, notably Milton Friedman, and it turned Chile into a rare Latin American success. In time, it also facilitated a return to democracy. Chile was proof that freeing markets and curbing state control could generate broad-based prosperity, which socialist policies could only promise.*

*If that experiment weren't sufficient, it got another try on a much bigger scale when China's Deng Xiaoping abandoned the disastrous policies of Mao Zedong and veered onto the capitalist road. The result was an economic miracle yielding growth rates that averaged 10 percent per year.*

*The formula was too effective to be ignored. Over the past two decades, poorer nations have dismantled command-and-control methods and given markets greater latitude. Economic growth, not redistribution, has been the surest cure for poverty, and economic freedom has been the key that unlocked the riddle of economic growth...*

*Among many people a generation ago -- and among a few today -- free markets and private property were seen as the cause of poverty. But the number of adherents has dwindled in the face of repeated refutation.<sup>8</sup>*

As Chapman says, “even communists eventually have to make peace with reality.”

### ***Social Justice, Community and Culture: A Final Reflection***

Two of the key characteristics of social justice are *community* and *culture*.

#### **Social justice and community**

As we saw above, Roman Catholic scholars Aquinas, Taparali, and Pope Leo XIII understood every person is part of a larger community. Because God is Community/Trinity, to be made in the image of God means to be made for relationships in community. Our health is dependent on the health of the community.

Pastor Gary Skinner of Watoto Church in Kampala, Uganda, is fond of saying “the problems of the city are the problems of the church.” Similarly, Pastor Tim Keller of Redeemer Church says of his church, “a healthy city [indicates] a healthy church.” These pastors recognize that the church is not an isolated or internally focused institution. The church exists for others. She is present to serve the needs of the community.

All human institutions—families, businesses, civic institutions, churches, mosques, synagogues—are responsible to promote the good of the larger community, including political and economic justice.

When social justice is reduced to distribution of money, all that is needed is putting a government check in the mail. Help is arm’s-length and impersonal. *Relational* social justice, by contrast, demands that individuals, families, business, and civic and religious institutions contribute time, talent, and treasure to nurture the flourishing process.

Government has a role to play, guided by an inverse relationship between the size of the government and the level of involvement. The larger the government entity, the smaller should be its role in the area of social justice. Voluntary associations have greater responsibility than local government, local government more responsibility than state government, and state government more than national government. Perhaps the largest role a national government should have is creating an environment that supports the rule of law and encourages social peace.

In the Old Testament, social justice is known as *Shalom* – peace. This peace was bought at exorbitant cost; the grounding of justice is found in the Cross of Christ. We have been justified by grace, calling us to live justly. This is to be done both in our internal and



external worlds. Just as holiness is a personal spiritual discipline, justice is a public spiritual discipline.

Justice means *right relationships* with God, with our fellow citizens, and with the creation. Author, professor and Editor-in-Chief of *World Magazine* Marvin Olasky has said that social justice is "... about human flourishing, the sum total of millions of acts of relational justice."<sup>9</sup>

In 1831, Alexis de Tocqueville traveled to the United States and observed how radically different America was from his native France and the rest of Europe. He was amazed, for example, by the American penchant for voluntary association. In France, the populace looked to the government to solve their problems. In England, the people depended on the aristocracy. Americans, by contrast, formed voluntary groups to solve their community's problems.

### **Social justice and culture**

The second reality to understand about social justice is simply this: the root of injustice is cultural, not, economic. Most people wrongly think that injustice is rooted in a lack of resources. When people function from the mindset of a closed system, resources are limited, economics is a zero-sum proposition and the only way to achieve social justice is to redistribute scarce resources.

But lack of resources is not the main cause of social injustice. The main cause is *cultural*.

Consider Haiti, for example. The day before the 2010 earthquake, ten thousand mission and relief & development organizations, and tens of thousands of volunteers were working in Haiti. Financial aid was pouring into the country – one billion dollars a year in international aid and three billion dollars in aid from the Haitian Diaspora in the US, Canada, and Europe.

Since the earthquake, \$1.8 billion in private aid has been sent to Haiti (in addition to plans by the international community to raise \$5 billion more). Haiti was a calamity before the earthquake. Two years after the earthquake Haiti is still a calamity, notwithstanding all the good efforts of private citizens, private voluntary organizations, and the international community. If Haiti's problem were the lack of resources, she would be a functioning middle-class nation today.

So, why is Haiti poor? Not for lack of Christian outreach. Not only has the nation been inundated with billions of dollars in aid and the help of thousands of organizations, she has also been evangelized. Churches abound. Bible schools and seminaries are training

pastors and theologians. If evangelism and church planting were the keys to Haiti's problems, Haiti would be prospering.

The problem with Haiti is the Voodoo mindset of her people. Our colleague, Chris Ampadu, recently pointed out that someone described Haiti as 80% Catholic, 20% Protestant, and 100% Voodoo. As an animistic worldview, Voodoo does not provide a framework for a family, community, or nation to develop.

Bible schools may teach scripture stories or even the flow of Biblical history. Seminaries may teach theology and denominational distinctives. But unless we break the strongholds of the mind (see 2 Cor. 10:4-5), Haiti's people—Christian and non-Christian alike—will be bound by the mental stronghold of Voodoo. The culture is being shaped by Voodoo rather than by Christ and the biblical worldview that comports with reality.

Most aid organizations seek to mitigate the suffering caused by institutional, moral, and natural evil rather than attack the cultural framework that creates the poverty in the first place. Mission organizations seek to deal with the "spiritual condition" of the Haitian people without realizing that the soul is firmly attached to the body and the gospel needs to have a wholistic reach. It must transform all of each person – heart, soul, mind, and strength – and all of their relationships.

Culture is a product of cult (worship). If a people change their worship, say from Voodoo to Christ, a change in culture must follow. Genesis 1:26-28 is the original Cultural Mandate. Christians and Jews understand that people have been placed on earth to create culture, to take what God has provided and make it flourish. Haiti is waiting for people to embrace this understanding of life and discard the cultural mindset of fatalism and poverty.

The spiritual realm impacts the physical realm through culture. When people come to Christ, their culture is to be reformed. Following that, the laws, structures, and institutions of society need to be rebuilt. Faith rooted in truth must produce godly culture, and godly culture must redeem the social, economic, and political institutions of society. This is true social justice.

Such transformation will take more than evangelists and teachers. It will take ordinary Christians who *think theologically* and live by the Judeo-Christian worldview ... business people creating a thriving economic order ... doctors and nurses increasing the health of the communities ... artists and architects bringing beauty into the home, marketplace, and public square ... scientists and technicians pushing back the ravages of natural evil

(thus preparing Haiti to withstand the next earthquake) ... farmers and agriculturalists producing more and healthier food.

We end this paper on social justice by quoting Oswald Chambers in *My Utmost for His Highest*: "Never look for justice in this world, but never cease to give it."<sup>10</sup>

In a fallen world, we will always face injustice. As Christians we should spend more time extending justice to others and less time demanding justice for ourselves.

*Addendum: Comments and Responses from the Blog*

**Comment:** Can we put all underpinning beliefs related to social justice into a 2 by 2 box? Yes, God (sometimes) works through a supernatural “open” process and through “moral” people, but surely we have sometimes seen the poor cared for by “amoral” atheists.

**Response:** This is true. People who are immoral sometimes act morally and people who profess to act by a moral standard at times do not. But in each case the person is acting apart from the implication of their framework. What do I mean? An atheistic-amoral framework has no basis to do good or to pursue justice. That framework, by its nature, encouraged “the survival of the fittest” and sees nature as “red and tooth and claw.” The propensity is toward the accumulation and use of power, the goal is to survive, to come out on top. People who function compassionately are doing so from their human nature as given by God and not as an impulse from their atheistic framework.

**Comment:** There are millions of well-meaning Christians who pity the poor as simply lacking material resources, and think the solution is to go on a mission trip to build stuff for them.

**Response:** Yes. Often these folks are motivated by Christ, but they do not reflect on what they are doing and thus they tend to create more poverty. Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert of The Chalmers Center have written a book, *When Helping Hurts*, which responds to these well-intended mistakes.

**Comment:** Isn't it oversimplification to split people into Judeo-Christian or Atheistic-Materialistic paradigms? Doesn't that miss the possibility that people (and belief systems) are more complex and nuanced? For example, solving material poverty will certainly require creation of wealth through development of human skills, but may also require that government play a proper role in protecting society's most vulnerable citizens.

**Response:** Belief systems are very complex. In some ways this is good. At the same time it provides challenges. Yes, these systems may be nuanced, but the nature of the nuances will conform to the boundaries which define the system.

It is important for government to protect by the rule of law. Each person, rich or poor, healthy or sickly, young or old, female or male, black or white, is to be equal before the law. It is the government's priority to provide justice and social peace so that free

citizens might pursue the health and prosperity of their families in a framework of economic freedom.

Here's a perspective on levels of responsibility that a society would do well to observe. First, we must practice personal responsibility at an individual level. After that, comes family responsibility, followed by the responsibility of voluntary associations such as churches, synagogues, mosques, boy and girls clubs, civic clubs. Only then should government responsibility be invoked in providing a safety net, and even then the responsibility of local government precedes that of state government. Federal government begins only after that. Part of the beauty of this model is that those who are closer to the need can provide more personal help. Unfortunately today, in the US and other places, we assume the federal government is the party responsible to solve problems. So the solutions tend to be bureaucratic and top-down. Money replaces personal responsibility.

Here's a question that frames part of the battle we are facing in the US today: *Will our citizens be responsible? Will they be free and "large" human beings, or will the government continue to take on more and more responsibility that belongs elsewhere?* In such a scenario the government grows and people shrink to insignificance.

We highly recommend Marvin Olasky's *The Tragedy of American Compassion*. This is a must-read for all poverty fighters. Olasky shows what characterized poverty fighting programs born out of a Judeo-Christian worldview and what happened to compassion in the West when we moved away from a Judeo-Christian to a deistic worldview and eventually to an atheist worldview.

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Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Lewis, C.S., *Of Other Worlds: Essays and Stories*, Harcourt, Inc., 1975, page 38

<sup>2</sup> Novak, Michael, *Social Justice: Not What You Think It Is*, Heritage Lectures; The Heritage Foundation, December 29, 2009; page 1

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, page 10

<sup>4</sup> Udo Middelmann in a Spring 2012 letter to friends of Francis A. Schaeffer Foundation

<sup>5</sup> "Real Social Justice," Nov 26, 2010, by Ryan Messmore at *On the Square* from the website, *FirstThings.com*, <http://www.firstthings.com/onthesquare/2010/11/real-social-justice>

<sup>6</sup> Lewis, C.S., *The Screwtape Letters Special Illustrated Edition*, Harper Collins Publishers, 2009, page 221

<sup>7</sup> "Don't Confuse the Common Good with Statism," Oct 26, 2011, by Michael Novak at *On the Square* from the website, *FirstThings.com*, <http://www.firstthings.com/onthesquare/2011/10/donrsquot-confuse-the-common-good-with-statism>

<sup>8</sup> "Toward the Conquest of World Poverty," Mar 29, 2012, by Steve Chapman at *Reason.com*, <http://reason.com/archives/2012/03/29/toward-the-conquest-of-world-poverty>

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in "Seek Social Justice: Foretaste of Heaven," by Mark Earley, *BreakPoint*, March 5, 2010

<sup>10</sup> Chambers, Oswald, *My Utmost for His Highest*, June 27 entry