

## **Towards a Theology of Justice: Contributions of the OT to Concepts of Biblical Justice**

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Throughout church history, the church has developed orthodox positions often by evaluating two extreme (often false) positions. The church came to affirm the dual nature of Jesus Christ (fully God and fully man) as well as the Trinity (three eternally coexistent persons with one divine essence) in response to the Arian controversy which emphasized the humanity of Christ at the expense of His deity while also responding to the docetist and gnostic views that emphasized the deity of Christ at the expense of His humanity. The formation of the canon was in response to Marcionism which diminished the value of the Old Testament and several Gospels (i.e. Matthew, Mark and John) as well as the General Epistles while the authors of the gnostic and pseudepigraphal writings that claimed inspiration for their works. In a more contemporary sense, the modern debate over social justice seems to pit historical extremes of the church in which some argued against getting involved in social matters because it is pointless to clean a sinking ship (as an illustration of why one should not focus on earthly matters since the world will be destroyed)<sup>1</sup> against the liberation theology and social gospel advocates who diminish the eternal value of the gospel in an effort to focus on current issues affecting the oppressed. A biblical assessment of the Old Testament and New Testament will show that God is very concerned with justice on earth but such concerns should be for His glory and for the end of bringing the lost to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. This paper will evaluate the Old Testament and New Testament concepts of justice with a desire to demonstrate how the church should get involved in societal issues of our day.

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<sup>1</sup> For specific examples of abuses of the Bible to avoid involvement in social issues like slavery and segregation see Michael D. Emerson, *Divided By Faith*, (New York, Oxford University Press, 2000), 21-49.

### Method

This paper will utilize Stallard's traditional dispensational model for developing a concise theology of biblical justice. In his article entitled "Literal Interpretation, Theological Method, and the Essence of Dispensationalism," he describes this traditional dispensational approach as follows:

<b>1</b>	The recognition of one's own preunderstanding
<b>2</b>	The formulation of a biblical theology from the Old Testament based upon literal interpretation (grammatical-historical method of interpretation) of the Old Testament text
<b>3</b>	The formulation of a biblical theology from the New Testament based upon literal interpretation (the grammatical-historical method of interpretation) of the New Testament text, which method includes the backgrounds arrived at via point 2 above
<b>4</b>	The production of a systematic theology by harmonizing all inputs to theology including points 2 and 3 above <sup>2</sup>

With respect to my preunderstanding, I acknowledge that I work at a primarily African American Bible College and have a Mexican mother so my personal experiences with minorities has affected my approach to this issue. From a theological perspective, I am an evangelical traditional/classical/essentialist dispensationalist<sup>3</sup> who believes in the inerrancy of the original autographa of the Scripture, a literal approach to interpretation, a moderate Calvinist who believes that the good news of the gospel requires one to acknowledge he or she is a sinner who cannot save himself or herself, that Jesus died on the cross to pay the

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<sup>2</sup>Mike Stallard, "Literal Interpretation, Theological Method, and the Essence of Dispensationalism," *Journal of Ministry and Theology*, 1, no. 1 (Spring 1997): 29.

<sup>3</sup>Some have recently seemed to portray the dispensationalist system as though it were at odds with a passion for social justice issues. See, for example, Bryan Loritts, *Insider Outsider: My Journey As a Stranger in White Evangelicalism and My Hope for Us All* (Grand Rapids, MI, Zondervan, 2018), 42-53. However, I think a literal dispensational reading of the Bible should lead to concern about social justice issues.

penalty for those sins and rose again to prove His victory over sin and death, and that salvation is completely by grace through faith in trusting Jesus' finished work on the cross as payment for the person's sin for eternal life. From a political perspective, I consider myself to be a compassionate conservative that typically votes Republican. I believe that capitalism is a better and more biblical economic system than socialism. I fully acknowledge that my preunderstanding can affect the conclusions I reach in this paper and will try to reading my assumptions into the passages I evaluate.

The second step will be to evaluate verses related to justice in the Old Testament from a literal perspective through the lens of the original Israelite audience. The next step will be to see how the New Testament describes justice with the Old Testament as background material. The next step will be to harmonize the data from the Old Testament and New Testament to help develop a theology of biblical justice. The final step will be to determine how these concepts apply to modern situations.<sup>4</sup>

The last step of application will utilize a model that was presented in a previous paper that was written for the Council of Dispensational Hermeneutics.<sup>5</sup> In that paper, I argued that a dispensational approach effectively contributes to accurate expository preaching because dispensationalists rightly recognize the process of beginning with the exegesis of the text, moving to the identification of the timeless theological truth, and then

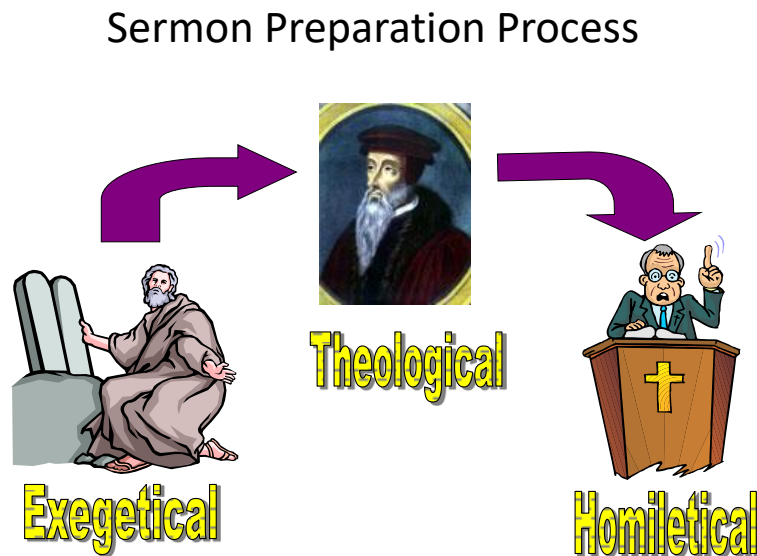
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<sup>4</sup>Time and space do not permit an exhaustive evaluation of justice in the Old Testament and New Testament or how these concepts apply to all situations where justice may be involved.

<sup>5</sup>Joseph Parle, "Overcoming the Myth that Dispensationalists Do Not Believe the Old Testament Applies to Modern Contexts," (Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Council on Dispensational Hermeneutics, Houston, Texas, 4 October 2012), 3.

identifying the homiletical application to the contemporary audience (see Figure 1 below).<sup>6</sup>

Hence, this paper will determine what aspects of justice are timeless as indicated by the text itself as occurring in the future or in the immutable character of God.



**Figure One: Expository Preaching Lesson Preparation Process**

#### Terminology

Prior to evaluating the Old Testament and New Testament verses that deal with justice, a discussion of terms may be in order. This paper hesitantly uses the phrase “biblical justice” instead of social justice because of the baggage that the phrase “social justice” has in conservative theological circles. The phrase “social justice warriors” is often used disparagingly of evangelicals and others who advocate for social justice. Part of the criticism is due to the fact that liberals have co-opted the phrase to refer to distribution of wealth. For instance, Finn and Jacobson in a blog for Oxford University Press state that some define

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<sup>6</sup>This process is described in Timothy S. Warren, “The Theological Process in Sermon Preparation,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 156, no. 623: 336–356.

it this way when they write, “Discussions of social justice in the context of social work generally address the differing philosophical approaches used to inform societal decisions about the distribution or allocation of resources. These discussions refer to three dominant theories of resource distribution: Utilitarian, libertarian, and egalitarian.”<sup>7</sup> The Center for Economic and Social Justice provides the following definitions:

Social justice encompasses economic justice. Social justice is the virtue which guides us in creating those organized human interactions we call institutions. In turn, social institutions, when justly organized, provide us with access to what is good for the person, both individually and in our associations with others. Social justice also imposes on each of us a personal responsibility to collaborate with others, at whatever level of the “Common Good” in which we participate, to design and continually perfect our institutions as tools for personal and social development...

Economic justice, which touches the individual person as well as the social order, encompasses the moral principles which guide us in designing our economic institutions. These institutions determine how each person earns a living, enters into contracts, exchanges goods and services with others and otherwise produces an independent material foundation for his or her economic sustenance. The ultimate purpose of economic justice is to free each person to engage creatively in the unlimited work beyond economics, that of the mind and the spirit.<sup>8</sup>

The frequent connection between social justice and the redistribution of wealth (which is not how I personally would use the term) may warrant a better term.

However, I hesitate in doing so because of the history of the phrase “social justice.”

The origin of the phrase social justice dates back to Luigi Taparelli d’Azeglio in 1843. He

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<sup>7</sup>Janet L. Finn and Maxine Jacobson, “What is social justice?” Available at <https://blog.oup.com/2017/03/what-is-social-justice/> (Accessed on August 29, 19).

<sup>8</sup>Center for Economic and Social Justice, “Defining Economic and Social Justice,” Available at <https://www.cesj.org/learn/definitions/defining-economic-justice-and-social-justice/> (Accessed on August, 29, 2019).

used the term in almost the opposite way that those who desire to redistribute wealth use it today:

Taparelli discusses justice and social justice against the background of the French Revolution of 1789 with its cry of equality and brutal treatment of kings and aristocracies, and also of the revolution of 1830 that installed Louis Philippe. The question at issue for him, although Taparelli does not formulate it precisely in these terms, is something like this: how should a society treat its traditional rulers? Is the existence of an aristocracy unjust? For 'distributive justice governs public administrators in the distribution of the offices (funzioni) of the society.' His answer is that social justice requires us to accept inequality. Justice, he argues, is the habitual inclination to level or balance accounts. Distributive justice equalizes proportions in the common good. Social justice is justice between man and man. But what proportions exist between man and man? Considering man in the abstract endowed solely with the qualities of human nature, between man and man the relationship that exists is one of complete equality, for "man and man" signifies here nothing other than humanity replicated twice.

What proportionate equality could be greater? Social justice should therefore level all men in regard to the rights given with their humanity, since the Creator has equalized them by nature; man fulfills the intentions of his Maker by acting according to the norm of this justice...The consequence is that justice has very different requirements for private goods and common or social goods. In the one case it requires a quantitative equality, but not in the other...

From this brief account certain important things should be clear about Taparelli's conception of social justice. Unlike the conception of social justice generally accepted in our society at the present time, which is socialist and difficult, if not impossible, to harmonize with our ordinary conception of justice, Taparelli's conception 1) is simply the ordinary and traditional conception of justice applied in a new area, namely the constitutional arrangements of society, 2) does not apply to states of affairs in society that could exist independently of human actions, 3) constitutes a defense of societal inequality, and 4) is conservative.<sup>9</sup>

The co-opting of the term for economic purposes seems to be a twentieth century phenomenon.

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<sup>9</sup>Thomas Patrick Burke, "The Origins of Social Justice: Taparelli d'Azeglio," Available at <https://isi.org/intercollegiate-review/the-origins-of-social-justice-taparelli-dazeglio/> (Accessed on August 29, 2019).

Since some people are concerned about the current correlation between social justice and the coercive redistribution of wealth, some use the phrase “generous justice”<sup>10</sup> while others prefer “biblical justice.” Carter discusses biblical justice when he quotes Tim Keller’s statements regarding two Hebrew words that are commonly used for justice: *mishpat* and *tzadeqah*. Keller says:

The Hebrew word for ‘justice,’ *mishpat*, occurs in its various forms more than 200 times in the Hebrew Old Testament. Its most basic meaning is to treat people equitably. It means acquitting or punishing every person on the merits of the case, regardless of race or social status. Anyone who does the same wrong should be given the same penalty.

But *mishpat* means more than just the punishment of wrongdoing. It also means giving people their rights. Deuteronomy 18 directs that the priests of the tabernacle should be supported by a certain percentage of the people’s income. This support is described as ‘the priests’ *mishpat*,’ which means their due or their right. *Mishpat*, then, is giving people what they are due, whether punishment or protection or care. ...

We get more insight when we consider a second Hebrew word that can be translated as ‘being just,’ though it usually translated as ‘being righteous.’ The word is *tzadeqah*, and it refers to a life of right relationships.

When most modern people see the word ‘righteousness’ in the Bible, they tend to think of it in terms of private morality, such as sexual chastity or diligence in prayer and Bible study. But in the Bible, *tzadeqah* refers to day-to-day living in which a person conducts all relationships in family and society with fairness, generosity and equity. It is not surprising, then, to discover that *tzadeqah* and *mishpat* are brought together scores of times in the Bible.

These two words roughly correspond to what some have called ‘primary’ and ‘rectifying justice.’ Rectifying justice is *mishpat*. It means punishing wrongdoers and caring for the victims of unjust treatment. Primary justice, or *tzadeqah*, is behavior that, if it was prevalent in the world, would render rectifying justice unnecessary, because everyone would be living in right relationship to everyone else. Therefore, though *tzadeqah* is primarily about being in a right relationship with God, the righteous life that results is profoundly social.<sup>11</sup>

Carter then concludes:

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<sup>10</sup> Timothy Keller, *Generous Justice: How God’s Grace Makes Us Just* (New York: Penguin Books, 2016).

<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

As Keller says, when the two Hebrew words *tzadeqah* and *mishpat* are tied together—as they are more than three dozen times—the English expression that best conveys the meaning is ‘social justice.’ Social justice, then, would be not only a biblical concept, but also a subset of biblical justice.

Claiming that we need only ‘biblical justice’ and not ‘social justice’ is a category error (i.e., a semantic or ontological error in which things belonging to a particular category are presented as if they belong to a different category). Biblical justice includes all forms of God-ordained justice, including the rectifying justice that belongs to the government (what we’d call public or legal justice) as well as justice between individuals (what could be called inter-individual justice) and justice involving organizations and groups (what we’d call social justice).<sup>12</sup>

While I agree with Carter that biblical justice includes social justice, I hesitantly prefer to use the phrase biblical justice because of the baggage that social justice now has with it. However, I completely agree with Carter when he writes, “Social justice, as a biblical concept, is not a term we should abandon without a fight. To paraphrase Colson, we should not shrink from the term nor allow the secular world to distort its biblical meaning.”<sup>13</sup>

My preferred definition of social justice is as follows:

Perhaps it would be helpful to add that we use the term ‘social justice’ in the same way that Chuck Colson, Marvin Olasky, Albert Mohler, and many other conservative, biblically grounded Christians have used it. We don’t understand it in terms of government-mandated redistribution of wealth. On the contrary, we see it as a matter of the church rolling up its sleeves and becoming the hands and feet of Jesus. As Christians, we have a responsibility to redress those social factors that conspire to keep entire segments of our population mired in hopelessness and despair. What’s more, we need to approach this task primarily from a *relational* perspective. As we understand it, ‘social justice’ means nothing more than ‘doing right by one’s neighbor.’ As you know, that’s an idea that figures significantly in the words of Jesus.<sup>14</sup>

This definition provides a more biblical perspective of the concept.

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

<sup>14</sup>Focus on the Family, “What the Bible Says About Human Rights and Social Justice,” Available at <https://www.focusonthefamily.com/family-qa/what-the-bible-says-about-human-rights-and-social-justice/> (Accessed on August 30, 2019). Emphasis his.



### Old Testament Theology of Justice

While this is not a comprehensive Old Testament theology on justice, this section of the paper will attempt to summarize some of the salient points about justice. This section will focus on how the Old Testament portrays God as a God of justice who predicts a future full of justice, and requires mankind to participate in acts of justice,.

#### Portrayal of God as a God of Justice

The Old Testament repeatedly portrays God as a God of justice. Justice is an inherent part of God's character. For instance, Deuteronomy 32:4 (NASB) says, "The Rock! His work is perfect, For all His ways are just; A God of faithfulness and without injustice, Righteous and upright is He." Multiple times in the Old Testament God's character is associated with justice (Isa. 30:18, Jer. 4:1-2, Mal. 2:17, Psalm 89:14). Isaiah 30:18 because both God's covenantal name of Yahweh and the name Elohim are associated with His justice (כִּי־אֱלֹהֵי מִשְׁפָּט יְהוָה ). Isa. 61:8 (ESV) proclaims that God loves justice, "For I the LORD love justice; I hate robbery and wrong; I will faithfully give them their recompense, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them." Jeremiah 9:24 (ESV) declares that the Lord delights in justice, "I am the LORD who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the LORD." Isa. 33:5-6 (ESV) predicts a time when God will fill Zion with justice and righteousness. "The LORD is exalted, for he dwells on high; he will fill Zion with justice and righteousness, and he will be the stability of your times, abundance of salvation, wisdom, and knowledge; the fear of the LORD is Zion's treasure."

### Portrayal of Future of Justice

Several passages point to a future in which justice reigns, which would seem to indicate that God's desire for justice is not just limited to Old Testament Israel. For instance, Isaiah 28:17 (ESV) says, "And I will make justice the line, and righteousness the plumb line; and hail will sweep away the refuge of lies, and waters will overwhelm the shelter." Isaiah 9:7 predicts a messianic kingdom full of justice while Isaiah 42:4 states that the Messiah will not faint or become discouraged until He establishes justice in the earth (see also Jeremiah 23:5 and Jeremiah 33:15). Isaiah 32:15-16 predicts that once the Holy Spirit comes upon Israel that God will establish justice in the wilderness while Isaiah 51:4 predicts that God will set His justice as a light for the nations.

### God Demands Justice

In multiple instances God commands justice. Genesis 18:19 (NASB) says that God chose Abraham "so that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice." Micah 6:8 (ESV), "He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" Jeremiah 21:12 (ESV) says, "O house of David! Thus says the LORD: 'Execute justice in the morning, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor him who has been robbed, lest my wrath go forth like fire, and burn with none to quench it, because of your evil deeds.'" It appears that the Davidic kings were responsible for delivering people from oppressors who rob from others. Barclay states, "The reference is clearly to the judicial system. TEV renders 'Protect the person who is being cheated from the one who is cheating him.' The verb **has been robbed** is used elsewhere in Jeremiah only

in 22:3. It may have the meaning of ‘robbed’ (Jdg 9:25), but it may also be used in the sense of depriving someone of their rights (Isa 10:2). Note that although the text has **him**, ‘the person’ or ‘people’ would be better, since the reference is not to males alone.”<sup>15</sup>

Many of God’s commands regarding justice were protecting the most vulnerable. Zech. 7:9-10 (NASB), “Thus has the LORD of hosts said, ‘Dispense true justice and practice kindness and compassion each to his brother; <sup>10</sup> and do not oppress the widow or the orphan, the stranger or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another.’” The widow does not have a husband to look out for her; the orphan lacks parents; the stranger lacks the standing in the government for protection while the poor do not have the resources to secure their own protection. Each of these were worthy of justice in the eyes of God for His glory. Ralph Smith adds, “7:7–10 provides one of the finest summaries of the teaching of the former prophets. It has a strong emphasis on social justice. But it is not social justice for social justice’s sake. Social justice is God’s requirement. “Thus says Yahweh of hosts” (7:9). They refused to hearken to the words of Yahweh that he gave by his spirit through the former prophets (7:12). God requires social justice between brothers (7:10) and toward the disadvantaged (widows, orphans, aliens, and poor 7:10). The verbs are imperatives שפטו “judge” and עשו “do, or act.” They are commands from Yahweh.”<sup>16</sup> Hosea 12:7 rebukes rich people for oppressing the poor with false balances (see also Micah 6:11). Amos 5:11 rebukes those who trample on the poor and exact grain taxes

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<sup>15</sup> Barclay M. Newman Jr. and Philip C. Stine, *A Handbook on Jeremiah*, UBS Handbook Series (New York: United Bible Societies, 2003), 469.

<sup>16</sup> Ralph L. Smith, *Micah-Malachi*, vol. 32, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1984), 225.

on them. Ezekiel 18:7-8 commends a person who “does not oppress anyone, but restores to the debtor his pledge, commits no robbery, gives his bread to the hungry and covers the naked with a garment, does not lend at interest or take any profit, withholds his hand from injustice, executes true justice between man and man.” Several passages argue that Israel was supposed to defend the rights of the poor (Exodus 23:6, Deuteronomy 10:19, Deuteronomy 17:19, Deuteronomy 27:19, Psalm 82:3-4, Psalm 140:12, Proverbs 31:4-5, Isaiah 1:17, Isaiah 10:2, Jeremiah 7:6, Jeremiah 22:16, and Ezekiel 22:29).

The Old Testament does not only discuss justice but also injustice. Deuteronomy 16:19-20 (ESV) includes some themes that are commonly found in Old Testament justice passages, “You shall not pervert justice. You shall not show partiality, and you shall not accept a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and subverts the cause of the righteous. Justice, and only justice, you shall follow, that you may live and inherit the land that the LORD your God is giving you.” This Hebrew phrase translated pervert justice (תַּטֶּה (מִשְׁפָּט is often used of accepting bribes (1 Samuel 8:13, Proverbs 17:23, etc.) or denying the needy of the justice that they are due (Exodus 23:6, Deuteronomy 24:17, Deuteronomy 27:19, and Isaiah 10:2). Hence, God had a concern about ensuring that the most vulnerable people’s rights were preserved without duplicity or greed.

Another common Old Testament phrase is “justice and equity” or “justice and righteousness” that translates the same Hebrew phrase (מִשְׁפָּט וִצְדִיקָה ). 2 Samuel 8:15 (ESV) says, “So David reigned over all Israel. And David administered justice and equity to all his people.” The concept of equity in the eyes of the law seems to be an essential element to Old Testament justice. The Queen of Sheba acknowledged God’s role in making David a king

that would “execute justice and righteousness” (1 Ki. 10:9 ESV). Psalm 99:4 (ESV) includes all the elements of equity, justice and righteousness, “The King in his might loves justice. You have established equity; you have executed justice and righteousness in Jacob.” Proverbs 2:9 also declares these elements are a result of wise living. These same concepts of justice and righteousness describe the Lord in the Old Testament (cf. Jeremiah 9:24) as well as His Anointed Messiah Son (Jeremiah 23:5 and 33:15). God commands His people to model justice and righteousness (Jeremiah 22:33 and Amos 5:24), encourages those who do not to repent and model it (Ezekiel 18:27 and 33:14-19), and rebukes those who do not (Amos 5:7).

### Summary

A review of the Old Testament description of justice demonstrated that justice is presented as an essential part of God the Father and God the Son’s character. God predicts a future full of justice and commands His people to show justice even to the most helpless of society, namely the poor, widow, orphan, and alien. God demands His leaders show justice, equity, and righteousness in their dealings as opposed to perverting justice and accepting bribes.

### Synthesis with the New Testament

This section will review the concept of justice in the New Testament in order to review continuity or discontinuity from the New Testament concepts. Based on that assessment, an argument will be made to evaluate how Old Testament and New Testament concepts of justice apply to modern contexts.

A review of New Testament discussions of justice seems to validate some of the concepts discussed in the review of the Old Testament. The point that justice is reflected in the character of God is found in Jesus' quotation of Isaiah 42:1-4 in Matthew 12:18-21. Similarly, Jesus quotes Isaiah 61:1 in Luke 4:17-18. Regarding these quotations, Keller writes, "These are the words Jesus read in the synagogue in Nazareth when he announced the beginning of his ministry. He identified himself as the 'Servant of the Lord,' prophesied by Isaiah, who would bring 'justice' to the world (Isaiah 42:1-7). Most people know that Jesus came to bring forgiveness and grace. Less well known in the biblical teaching that a true experience of the grace of Jesus Christ inevitably motivates a man or woman to seek justice in the world."<sup>17</sup>

The New Testament also seems to have a great deal of concern for the poor. In Matthew 11:4 Jesus proclaims to John the Baptist that the poor have the good news preached to them as a sign of His messianic identity. Paul says in Galatians 2:9-10 (ESV), "And when James and Cephas and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given to me, they gave the right hand of fellowship to Barnabas and me, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised. Only, they asked us to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do." A frequent refrain from those who criticize the so called social justice warriors is that if one just preaches the gospel that should be enough. In this passage, it seems as though preaching the gospel to the Gentiles was not enough for the pillars of the early church. They also wanted for Paul to dedicate himself to caring for the poor. James 1:27 expresses a similar concern for widows and orphans as an essential

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<sup>17</sup>Tim Keller, *Generous Justice*, xiii.

element of godly religion when James says. "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world" (James 1:27 ESV). James continues that with an admonition against a partiality that favors rich visitors to the church over poor ones (2:1). John says in 1 John 3:17-18 (ESV), "But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth." Colossians 4:1-2 emphasizes equity for slaves when masters are encouraged to treat their slaves with justice and fairness.

As in the Old Testament, God rebukes His people when they do not operate justly. Jesus says in Matthew 23:23-24 (NASB), "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others. You blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!" In this passage, Jesus declares that justice, mercy, and faithfulness are the weightier provisions of the law and he criticizes the Pharisees for not giving those the attention they deserve while trying to legalistically obey some of the less weighty aspects of the law. Mason says:

The Lord Jesus calls justice a weighty matter in Scripture. Jesus is using a play on words by contrasting the naturally light weight of the mint, dill, and cumin with the weight and expanse of the deeper matters of the law. According to R.T. France, 'There is no suggestion that the scribes and Pharisees were opposed in principle to justice, mercy, and faithfulness. The problem is they did not devote the same care to working out the practical implications of these basic principles as they did to the minutiae of tithing herbs.' ... What minutiae are we engaging in to show our dedication to exegesis, historical theology, biblical theology, systematic theology, Old Testament, New Testament, Bible exposition, hermeneutics, pastoral

theology, etc. while we miss some of the key opportunities for fleshing out and communicating a commitment to the heart of God?<sup>18</sup>

Galatians 2:11-14 also involves a situation in which Paul confronted Peter for not acting consistently with the truth of the gospel. In neglecting to eat with the Gentiles in the presence of the Jews, Paul confronted Peter for acting hypocritically and not treating the Gentiles with the equity that the gospel demands. In Acts 28:4, the native people mistakenly interpret Paul's bite from a serpent to be justice from God for a murderous act.

The New Testament does add a dynamic to justice that is not found as frequently in the Old Testament. Luke 18 includes some of these concepts. Luke 18:7-8 (ESV) says, "And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" This passage describes how God as a just judge (in comparison to the unjust judge in the previous parable) will respond to the cries for justice on the part of His followers. He then proceeds to contrast a self-righteous Pharisee with a tax collector who begs God for forgiveness before concluding in Luke 18:14 (ESV), "I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted." Romans 3:26 (ESV) makes a similar statement when it says, "It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus." This New Testament concept of God's justice being preserved through the finished work of Christ is based on Old Testament concepts (Genesis 15:6, Habakkuk 2:4) but the New

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<sup>18</sup>Eric Mason, *Woke Church* (Chicago, IL, Moody Publishers, 2018) 48.



Testament lends greater clarity to how God's justice and mercy would be preserved. Hence, this New Testament concept of justice does not show discontinuity with the Old Testament but instead expands on concepts already present in the Old Testament.

### Application

Thus far, the paper has focused on the exegetical analysis of what the Old Testament and New Testament texts would have meant to the original audience in an effort to compose a theology of biblical justice. As part of the process for determining how one should apply those texts to contemporary situations, one must identify the timeless truths. Because the Old Testament and New Testament concepts of biblical justice are connected to the character of God, it is fair to assume that those concepts are timeless. Furthermore, in both the Old Testament and New Testament, God requires His people to advocate justice for all people, especially those who cannot speak for themselves. This includes but is not limited to the orphan, widow, alien, and the poor. It would be a consistent application of this theological principle to include the unborn, those who are trafficked, persecuted Christians domestically as well as internationally, and other oppressed people.

Additionally, the biblical concept of justice emphasizes equity and avoiding partiality. Justice should not be bought by bribes and access to legal justice should not be disproportionately based on income. As a church, we should welcome the rich and poor alike into our fellowship. We should also fight all forms of racial injustice in which individuals are discriminated against based on race. God's concern for the alien and equity should cause Christians to advocate submission to governing authorities according to Romans 13, not only for illegal aliens but the companies and industries that rely on their

inexpensive labor. We should pursue legal avenues like a guest worker program that would allow more legal immigration while providing inexpensive labor to those businesses and industries that desperately need it.

Furthermore, while the New Testament expands on the justice of God when viewed through the lens of the gospel and the finished work of Jesus Christ on the cross, one should not see that as the only remedy to address society's injustices. While Paul was sent to share the gospel to the gentiles, he was still encouraged to remember the poor. When Paul confronted Peter for his hypocritical actions towards the gentiles while trying to impress his Jewish friends, he did so in light of the gospel. As Jesus's statements to the Pharisees, we as Christians should be more concerned with the weightier issues of God's Word like sharing the gospel with the unreached, care for the poor, deliverance for the oppressed, and equity than things like the right to bear arms which comes from a valid application of Luke 22:36-37 but certainly does not appear to be as central to a scriptural understanding of Scripture that some conservative evangelicals make it out to be. It seems unusual that as Christians we would rightly speak out about the rights of the unborn yet act as though advocating for someone else who cannot speak for himself or herself is a form of Cultural Marxism.<sup>19</sup> These statements are not intended to agree with social gospel advocates who convert the gospel from an eternal salvation/deliverance to earthly

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<sup>19</sup>To be clear, I wholeheartedly support the right to bear arms as being necessary for protecting one's family and preserving a free society. I also support the rights of the unborn. My only point is that the Bible says less about these issues but they often are the central issues Christian conservatives fight for while being relatively silent about other issues the Bible speaks far more frequently about. And even when we discuss abortion, very little attention is given to fertilized embryos that are destroyed at fertility clinics and other similar issues that have the same effect as an abortion but are more likely remedies a rich person would use as opposed to a poor person. If Christians used the same vigor to oppose segregation, slavery, and other racial injustices as they have guns, our society would be very different.

deliverance. Instead, because of the glory of God and His gospel, we advocate for justice because of the grace the gospel has provided in us. Eric Mason writes:

In Western theology, we tend to lack a comprehensive view of God's perfections, particularly righteousness/justice and even our understanding of justification. Justification is a huge greenhouse of truth that extends beyond 'being declared righteous'! Justified isn't merely a position but a practice! Christ's righteousness being imputed to us by faith leads our being right with God as well as our making things right on earth – knowing that Jesus will return and bring to completion the work He has been doing through his people.<sup>20</sup>

### Conclusion

This paper analyzed some verses in the Old Testament and New Testament related to justice. I utilized Stallard's traditional dispensational method for analyzing the passages to develop a theology of justice based on the biblical data. This involves acknowledging presuppositions, then interpreting the Old Testament literally, followed by the New Testament literally with the Old Testament as a background, with the final step of synchronizing results. After implementing this process, I utilized Warren's process of identifying the timeless truth in order to get specific applications. I made the argument that social justice (as defined as loving one's neighbor) is a biblical concept in both the Old Testament and New Testament and the biblical principles of seeking justice for all (especially those who cannot pursue justice for themselves) is an applicable principle in the current dispensation. Perhaps, rather than appealing to the phrase "social justice warrior" as a derogatory term, the Bride of Christ can see those who speak out for those who cannot speak for themselves in more of a positive light.

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<sup>20</sup>Eric Mason, *Woke Church*, 45.