

Social Justice
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Outline

Introduction

Four Principles Developed

1. Hermeneutical aspect of dispensationalism
2. Theological aspect of dispensationalism
3. The Perspective of Philemon on social justice advocates living under a nation's laws and under Christ's grace
4. Social Justice is pursued in the application of truths.

Finally, does Paul's dealings with slavery provide a sufficient perspective to address social justice for the church?

Introduction

How does dispensationalism address issues of social justice?

In general, dispensationalism presents a biblical worldview that enables the church to evaluate the answer to the society's call for social justice.

The initial concern: **what is social justice?**

- a. A definition of **social justice**:

It is a society's appeal for justice concerning an issue. In that appeal, who answers the call? Is it the culture's answer or is it God who answers the appeal? For us as Christians, the answer must be from what God has revealed.

- b. What is the biblical revelation of **justice**?

There are two expressions of **righteousness**:

First, an **immutable revelation** of righteousness is in Christ alone;

Matthew 5:17, 48 – Christ's person and teaching,

Romans 3:20-25 – Christ's work of redemption, made available to all who believe, demonstrates his righteousness.

Revelation 19:11 – Christ's second advent coming as white-horsed rider who judges and makes war with justice.

Second, a **mutable expression** of **righteousness** in humans;

Deuteronomy 15:12-18 – the Mosaic Law’s incorporation of slavery for the good of the poor,
1 Timothy 3:1-13 – the demanding standard for church leaders that are applied by imperfect humans.

The point of this essay is to answer this question:

- c. Does Philemon provide a sufficient perspective to address social justice?

Four principles will be developed from a dispensational point of view to answer this question:

First, the hermeneutical aspect of dispensationalism concerns the **literal** interpretation of texts.

E. D. Hirsch¹ and Kevin Vanhoozer² describe literal in terms of interpretation of **normal** communication. For Hirsch, **normal** written communication is an author’s intended meaning as expressed in the literary genre of the text. This meaning is both a **determinate** meaning expressed in a text, read in the immediate context, and a **stable** meaning in the progress of revelation. Vanhoozer considers **literal** in its Reformation origin, which is the author’s intended meaning, understood in a speech-act theory of communication. He also sees the meaning **determined** by the author and **stable** as developed in the progress of revelation.

As an example, the serpent (Gen. 3:1-15) is known as the enemy of God based on what it said to Eve (Gen. 3:1, 4). Even though that text doesn’t name the serpent as Satan, yet when mentioned in Revelation 12:9, the meaning hasn’t changed and the serpent of old is Satan.

This understanding of verbal meaning as stable is contrary to what Wm. J. Webb proposes.³ He proposes that verbal meaning evolves in the developing cultural usage. The trajectory of change in the meaning of **slavery** is seen in the meaning in the original pagan cultures “with abuses” to “slavery with better conditions and fewer abusers” in Exodus 21:2-11. “Having discovered the movement of the biblical text on slavery relative to the original social context, an extrapolation of that movement today leads to the abolition of slavery altogether.”⁴

¹ E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1967).

² Kevin Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998).

³ Wm. J. Webb, *Slaves, Women, and Homosexuals* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2001).

⁴ *Ibid.*, 37.

The question concerns the validity related to the extrapolation of meaning in the evolution of the cultural usage. In Philemon, the meaning of slavery is what it meant in the Roman culture. Paul doesn't extrapolate the meaning.

Second, the theological aspect of dispensationalism concerns what the Bible reveals about the essential human society structures:

Family – The revelation of the basic social structure, the family, relates to the creation of mankind as male and female (Gen. 1:27, 28). “God blessed them and said to them, ‘Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth.’” Even after the worldwide judgment of the flood, that basic blessing was repeated: “God blessed Noah and his sons and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth’” (Gen. 9:1, 7). Injustice first appeared when Cain slew Abel (Gen. 4:8).

Human government – Human government was not introduced until after the worldwide flood (Gen. 9:2-6). Adam had been called to mediate God's rule on earth (Gen. 1:26-28) based upon the word God had given to Adam (Gen. 2:16, 17). The serpent questioned God's word (Gen. 3:1) and then denied God's word (Gen 3:5) before Eve. The mediated rule was lost when Adam followed Eve in eating from the restricted fruit (Gen. 3:6, 7). No longer had Adam followed God's word, but now followed the serpent's word. As a result, Jesus identified the serpent (Satan) as “the ruler of the world” (John 12:31).

That population at Noah's time, ruled directly by Satan, quickly rebelled (Gen. 4:1-24 and 6:1-8). Then God declared, “I will wipe from the face of the earth mankind, whom I created ... for I regret I made them” (Gen. 6:7). Following the worldwide flood, the face of the earth was cleansed of the rebellious mankind. Then God blessed Noah (9:1), fashioned a hierarchy of the creatures, and then formed a governing structure by which humans were responsible to **protect** human life: “whoever sheds human's blood, his blood will be shed **by humans**, for God made humans in his image” (Gen. 9:6). This government was not to mediate God's revealed will, which Adam had lost, but to protect human life made in God's image from any animal or human that would take the life.

The role of human government would be assumed by individual nations formed after the “confusing of their languages” (Gen. 11:7). While each nation would fashion laws to protect human life, and to govern their people, God fashioned theocratic rule for Israel. Basic laws protected the rights of God (Ex. 20:2-8) and the rights of mankind (Ex. 20:9-17). These ten words were developed in some detail (Ex. 20:22-23:33). Deuteronomy was Moses's restatement of the **law** as holy and the **commandment** as righteous, just, and good (Rom. 7:12).

Yet Paul's assessment seems unexpected, when the Mosaic covenant included slavery laws. Since all humans are created equal, Frederick Douglass

specified the evil of slavery as the claim that one human makes in **owning** another human.⁵ Even though the Mosaic laws invoked indentured-servitude (Ex. 21:2-11), it still involved the **buying** and **selling** of lives. Males (21:2-8) and females (21:9-11) were treated differently, but in either case, it was treated as ownership.

In Deuteronomy, slavery seemed to be a necessary evil in dealing with poverty (15:11-18). For the indentured-servitude was limited to six years which allowed an impoverished servant to recover and to sustain himself and his family. Upon completion of the years of service the slave had two options: Deut. 15:13, 14 required the freedman to be given generously from God's blessing of the owner so that the freedman could resume an independent life, or Deut. 15:17 prescribes a ceremony for the servant to go through if he chose a permanent status of slavery.

So in a world where evil was permitted by God, the legal system of law could be described as fallibly righteous, as poverty was addressed through slavery.

Church – When Christ had been rejected by Israel, he promised that he would build the church: “I say to you that you are Peter (*petros*) and on this rock (*petra*) I will build my church and the gates of Hades will not overcome it” (Matt. 16:18). The church was fashioned with the pouring out of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:49). As the ministry of the apostles continued at the Temple, believers were “added to the Lord in increasing numbers” (Acts 5:21-33). Thus the church as the body of Christ grew (1 Cor. 12:12, 13) and Israel would be scattered and judged by Rome (Luke 21:20, 24; A.D. 70). The church didn't replace Israel but Israel would be set aside until Messiah would return to restore his kingdom with Israel as his people (Matt. 8:10, 11 and 26:64).

Relationship between government and church – These two social structures are both ordained by God. In different nations, they have co-existed in different ways. Yet they remain separate in identity. In addition, the church does not replace Israel as Jesus confirmed a future role for Israel (Matt. 26:29, 64).

As Jesus lived under Roman rule, he distinguished between what was Rome's from what was God's in the Temple worship. When asked, “Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar?” he answered, “Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's” (Matt. 22:15-22). During the first advent, the human government was distinguished from Jewish worship at the Temple.

After the church was founded at Pentecost, Peter gave priority to God's work in the church over human governing through the Temple service: “We must obey God rather than man” (Acts 5:29).

⁵ (1860) Frederick Douglass, “The Constitution of the U.S.: Is it Pro-Slavery or Anti-Slavery” (Blackpast.org).

While the church exists under human government established by God (Rom. 13:1-7), yet the mission of the church has priority, if the courses of the two are in conflict:

Third, the perspective of Philemon on social justice advocates living under a nation's laws and under Christ's grace.

Frederick Douglass focused on the evil of slavery: one human **owning** another human. Lightfoot summarized what that evil was in Roman slavery. "The slave had no relationships, no conjugal rights. Cohabitation was allowed to him at his owner's pleasure, but not marriage ... The share was absolutely at his master's disposal; for the smallest offence he might be scourged, mutilated, crucified, thrown to wild beasts."⁶

Yet he continued, "the New Testament, it has been truly said, is not concerned with any political or social institutions; for political and social institutions belong to particular nations and particular phases of society."⁷

Paul's Concern for Philemon

1. He addresses Philemon as a **slave-owner**;
v.15: "Onesimus will return, so that you may get him back **permanently**."
v.18: if Onesimus wronged him and if he was owed anything by the runaway slave, he could charge it to **Paul's** account.
2. He addresses Philemon as a **Christian**;
v.6: He prays for Philemon: "that your participation in the faith may become effective through knowing every good thing that is in us for the glory of Christ."
v.8, 9: "Though Paul had the authority to command him to do what is right, yet he appealed out of love, (v.14) that Philemon's good deed would not be out of **obligation** but out of **free will**.
v.10: That appeal is on behalf of Paul's son, Onesimus, whom he fathered while in chains.
v.11: Though he was once useless, as his running away demonstrated, (v.12) so as he was about to send him back, he added that "he was sending his own heart."

⁶ J. B. Lightfoot, *St. Paul's Epistles Colossians to Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1879, printed 1965), 321.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 323.

v.13: That implied that he would be helped if Onesimus might continue to serve him as he lingered in chains.
v.14: Yet he wouldn't do anything without Philemon's consent.
v.15: Then Paul ventured the idea that Onesimus had separated from Philemon so that Onesimus might become a Christian and be changed to serve permanently.
v.16: So he would send him back both as a slave and as a brother in the Lord.
v.17: So Philemon was to welcome him back.
v.19: Paul wrote in his own handwriting (which he seldom did) to assure him he would cover the costs. In addition, to remind Philemon what he owed Paul.
v.20: This kind of reception would certainly refresh Paul's heart in Christ.
v.21: Yet, Paul was assured that Philemon would do even more than he directly proposed.

Paul's Concern for Onesimus

1. Paul wrote on behalf of Onesimus, the **slave**:
v.12: Paul would send the **slave** back to Philemon.
2. Paul regarded Onesimus as a **Christian slave**:
v.10: He sent Onesimus as his **son** in Christ.
v.11: Even though he was a runaway slave, Paul was confident that he would **now** be useful.
v.15: Paul suggested, that as a runaway he realized his guilt which helped him receive the Gospel. Paul said here that a slave need not try to change his position as a slave, since he could serve his master as a servant of his Lord (1 Cor. 7:21, 22).

Conclusion

Paul makes no effort to change the structure of Roman slavery, but he does address the function of slavery. In that function among Christians, both the slave-owners served the best interests of the slave, and the slave serves the best interest of the slave-owners. And both are acting to bring glory to Christ.

Fourth, social justice is pursued in the application of the truths of Scripture according to a dispensational model of progressive revelation.

That model is characterized by the canon as a whole, which reveals a single narrative. That narrative consists of a **beginning** (Gen. 1-11), a **middle** with three dispensations (promise, law, church), and an **end** with the dispensation of the Kingdom and eternal state. The truths expressed in Scripture are applied consistent with the intent of the revelation in that dispensation. The intent of each dispensation has a historic application and a normative application. The **historic** application can involve the application to historic characters in that dispensation and the application to the audience addressed in each book. The **normative** application concerns the application in an audience addressed in subsequent dispensations. A summary consideration of the truths expressed in each dispensation and their application will follow:

Promise – The focus of the revelation of this dispensation is **promise**. A **promise** is a commissive statement⁸ in which God commits himself to bless Abraham. Abraham will be blessed and will be a mediating partner to bless all nations (Gen. 12:3b and 22:18). All of these promises have a **historic** application (Gen. 12:1d-3) to the patriarchs throughout Genesis 12-50. One of the promises because of its scope in blessing **all nations** will have a **normative** application throughout Scripture: “all nations of the earth will be blessed **by your offspring** because you have obeyed my command” (22:18). Paul refers to this promise as the Gospel (Gal. 3:8). The **normative** application rests in the fact that the statement is true, yet in the progress of revelation the full statement of the truth is clarified.

When this promise is believed, the believer receives a **righteous** standing before God (Gen. 15:6). Social justice is not the focus of this dispensation, but the “the way the of the Lord” would be taught which involves “doing what is right and just” (Gen. 18:19). This has **normative** application to the descendants of Abraham in the Old Testament and to the people of God in Scripture.

Law – The revelation of the law of Moses is the completed statement of “the way the of the Lord” (Gen. 18:19). In Exodus, it presupposed the formation of human government (Gen. 9:2-6) and the division of the human population into nations responsible to govern themselves (Gen. 11:6, 7). Among the nations, the people of Israel were chosen (Gen. 12:1ff and 25:23) with whom God would fashion a theocratic people, governed by the law of Moses (Ex. 19:4-8). As “the way of the Lord” was **added to** the promise, so the revelation of this law was **added alongside** of promise (Gal. 3:19-25). As such, it doesn’t replace the promise, which is the Gospel, but it does form a revelation of **social justice** for Israel.

⁸ G. B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1980).

Since it is included in Christian Scriptures, it has **normative** application of **Scripture-law**; “to imprison everything under sin’s power, so that the promise of faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe” (Gal. 3:22).

Historically – the historic **Covenant-law** was to be **applied** as a covenant with the people of Israel (Ex. 19:7, 8). The goal was that the people would be formed into a theocratic nation (Ex. 19:5, 6).

This law was intended to limit the spread of evil, not eliminate it. When God permitted evil to exist in this creation (Gen. 3:1-7), it would only be God himself who would establish **infallible righteousness** and **justice** in this world; it only speaks of **fallible righteousness** expressed by humans.

The inclusion of slavery in the Mosaic law is an example of this fallibility. So in a situation similar to Paul’s meeting with Onesimus, Deuteronomy had said, “Do not return a slave to his master when he has escaped from his master to you. Let him live among you wherever he wants within your gates, do not mistreat him” (25:15, 16).

Paul did **not apply** this law because he was under Roman jurisdiction, and not under the Mosaic law. Being under grace as a Christian, he did not apply the covenant law as an Israelite. The Mosaic law provided a righteous standard but permitted a fallible practice of justice in this fallen world. God also permitted the practice of slavery under the Roman government.

Grace – God’s gracious blessing in Christ was provided during the time that Jesus called “the times of the Gentiles” (Luke 21:24). So Paul’s application of justice under grace did not rebel against Rome, nor seek to remove the unjust structure of slavery. Rather he applied the righteousness available in the Gospel to both Philemon and Onesimus.

Then as believers, he proposed that Philemon treat Onesimus with grace as a member of the body of Christ. Further, Paul suggested that Philemon treat Paul himself with grace by allowing Onesimus to continue to serve his needs in his imprisonment. But this was Philemon’s decision, the slave-owner. In addition, Paul called Onesimus the slave to return to his master to serve as a servant of Christ.

While this application allowed the evil of the system of slavery in the times of Gentile government, it also transformed the practice of slavery in grace among Christians.

However, in the history of the church age, Christians found themselves included in positions of influence in Gentile government. These positions allowed them to bring change in an end of an unjust structure of slavery. This was the case with Wilberforce in England. In America, it took a civil war to address the system of slavery. Yet the struggle with racism remains in our society’s search for justice.

The human heart will not be changed except through the Gospel. Thus our churches ought to be free from racism.

Kingdom – The removal of the evil of slavery awaits the reign of Christ come to earth. But that reign will be enforced by “the rod of iron.” So the heart of men may still be inclined to use people for their own ends. And this inward rebellion can only be limited by external forces. It will only be removed when evil is finally judged. And Christ’s reign will accomplish that only after a final rebellion of Satan and the creation of a new heavens and earth (Rev. 20-22).

So social justice will be realized in the Millennial Kingdom in an outward appearance but the presence of Christ as King assures the expectation of a final realization. However, that assurance ultimately rests in the historic resurrection of Christ from the grave. It is with that hope that believers in the church age can live.

Finally, does Paul’s dealing with slavery provide a sufficient perspective to address social justice?

The issues raised by the call for social justice may be chosen by the culture⁹ but God enables an answer. What God determines as just is framed within a dispensational view of biblical history.

In broad terms, Paul’s treatment of slavery, as an issue of social justice, provides a sufficient perspective. The perspective includes both the governments’ social structure and the church’s social structure. In these broad terms, the answer involves what the law governing that nation says, and what living under grace says about the practice of believers.

In the case of slavery, the Roman law gave a citizen the right to own slaves. Paul uses Roman law as a protection against the plots of the Jews. But that does not mean that all the laws were just. Nor does it indicate that Paul expected social justice in the dispensation of grace. Rather, “let each one live his life in the situation the Lord assigned when God called him. This is what I command in all the churches ... he who is called by the Lord as a slave is the Lord’s freedman. Likewise he who is called as a free man is Christ’s slave. You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of people” (1 Cor. 7:17, 22, 23).

A nation’s laws can limit outward behavior but it can’t change attitudes. Under grace, Christ can change inner attitudes, which can change outward behavior “to bring glory to Christ.”

⁹ Charlotte Allen, “Pelagius the Progressive,” *First Things* (April, 2019), 11-13.