

Is Social Justice a Gospel Issue?

Kevin DeYoung

There is a simple, straightforward answer to the question posed in the title of this post: it depends.

Is social justice a gospel issue? That depends on what we mean by “social justice” and what we mean by “gospel issue.”

What Is Social Justice?

I’ve [written before](#) that social justice is a nebulous term, unassailable to some and arousing suspicion in others. For some Christians, if you aren’t into social justice, then you must not care about racism or abortion or sexual assault or inequality or the *imago dei* itself. Conversely, if you put in a good word for social justice around other Christians, they may assume you hug trees and hate police officers. The term has no shared meaning, or at least no precise definition we all agree on.

As far as we know, the term “social justice” dates to the 1840s when it was first used by a Jesuit philosopher named Luigi Taparelli (1793-1862). Taparelli was a strong supporter of papal authority and a conservative Catholic who argued that social inequality is not a violation of justice but a byproduct of justice, which he understood to be the right ordering of constitutional arrangements. Taparelli’s use of “social justice” bears little resemblance to how the term is used in common conversation today.

Before we can evaluate the connection between social justice and the gospel, we have to know what we mean by the former. If “social justice” entails specific policy proposals, certain candidates Christians should (or shouldn’t) support, and definite conclusions about economic and racial disparities, mass incarceration, immigration reform, and a host of other debatable topics, then we ought to be extremely cautious about linking something as politically prescriptive as social justice with something as universally salvific as the gospel.

Of course, Christians can (and should) have biblically informed convictions about policy proposals, candidates, and any number of controversial subjects. I would never wish to shut out Christian citizens and Christian thinking from the thorniest problems of our day. Some arguments *are* better than others. But we must distinguish between *good and bad arguments* and *Christian and non-Christian positions*. On the right, I sometimes hear that if you care about abortion (which, according to the Bible, is a sin) you *must* support Trump, while from the left, I hear that if you care about racism (which, according to the Bible, is also a sin) you *must never* support Trump. While I certainly have my opinions about our President, the church must not go beyond its God-given authority and power in binding the consciences of her members to positions or conclusions that honest Christians can disagree on.

I have my concerns with the term “social justice” and with all that it connotes. But what if we press for a less culturally controlled and more biblically defined understanding? Several years ago, I worked my way through the major justice passages in the Bible: [Leviticus 19](#), [Leviticus 25](#), [Isaiah 1](#), [Isaiah 58](#), [Jeremiah 22](#), [Amos 5](#), [Micah 6:8](#), [Matthew 25:31-46](#), and [Luke 4](#). My less-than-exciting conclusion was that we should not oversell or undersell what the Bible says about justice. On the one hand, there is a lot in the Bible about God’s care for the poor, the oppressed, and the vulnerable. There are also plenty of warnings against treating the helpless with cruelty and disrespect. On the other hand, justice, as a biblical category, is not synonymous with anything and everything we feel would be good for the world. Doing justice means following the rule of law, showing impartiality, paying what you promised, not stealing, not swindling, not taking bribes, and not taking advantage of the weak because they are too uninformed or unconnected to stop you.

So for simplicity sake, let's take biblical "social justice" to mean something like "treating people equitably, working for systems and structures that are fair, and looking out for the weak and the vulnerable." If that's what we mean, is social justice a gospel issue?

What Is a Gospel Issue?

Again, we have to define our terms. If "gospel issue" means we are smuggling good works into the *sola fide* side of the equation, then clearly social justice is not a gospel issue. We don't save the least of these in order to save ourselves.

Likewise, if "gospel issue" means "as important as the proclamation of Christ crucified" then the answer must again be no. There is only one thing that can be of first importance, and that, according to Paul in [1 Corinthians 15](#), is the message that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures and was raised on the third day.

I'll go even further: "gospel issue" should not be shorthand for "you must be passionate about all the same things I'm passionate about." Nor should it be synonymous with notions of "building the kingdom" or "transforming the culture." By the same token, [preachers must be careful](#) lest they allow CNN and Fox News, not to mention Twitter and Facebook, to set the agenda for their weekly pulpit ministry. If pastors in our day let cultural concerns crowd out the preaching of new birth, repentance, and justification by faith alone, it wouldn't be the first time in the church's history that the "gospel" became more social than gospel.

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And yet, "gospel issue" need not mean any of these things. If "gospel issue" means "a necessary concern of those who have been saved by the gospel" or "one aspect of what it means to keep in step with the gospel" or "realities without which you may not be truly believing the gospel," then social justice is certainly a gospel issue. When biblically defined, social justice is part and parcel of loving our neighbor as ourselves. It's part of keeping the second table of the Decalogue. It's part of doing the good works God has prepared in advance for us to walk in ([Eph. 2:10](#)).

Conclusion

As in so many controversies, we must be quicker to define our terms than to define our opponents. No doubt, there are real disagreements worth exploring and exposing. But there also may be more agreement than some might initially imagine.

Depending on our definitions, social justice and the gospel may be miles apart, or they may be as close as loving God by obeying his commands ([John 14:15](#)).

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