

The role of the black church in social justice



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The role of the Black church has always been critical to the advancement and viability of the Black community. Perhaps, because of the political, socioeconomic, and cultural conditions of Blacks in America, the Black church has been more critical to the Black community than any other church to their respective communities.

No other people have endured the intense vitriol systemic racism in America than Black people. Therefore, the Black church, has historically played a major role in the liberation of Black people. The Civil Rights movement which did much to secure the liberation of Black Americans was primarily a movement of Black Christian Leaders.

Other communities have recently attached their present plights to the Civil Rights movement of the past. For instance, the LGBTQ movement among others, has argued that their fight for rights in society are the same as the fight for civil rights Black Americans have been fighting. I disagree.

The Evangelical movement, outside of the Black church has made a case against social justice that is not accurate, nor does it address the conditions the Black church is called to rectify. The evangelical movement does not understand the Black church because it suggests that every church must function the same without regard to their respective communities.

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

" The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners

and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor (Luke 4: 18-19)."

Recently there has been a debate in the evangelical Christian world about social justice. The likes of John MacArthur, Al Mohler, John Piper, and Tony Evans, to name a few, have all weighed in on the subject. The argument is essentially about the content of the message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. When contextualizing the gospel, is it proper to expand the definition of the gospel? Is it possible for groups of Christians to have differing definitions of the gospel?

The term social justice has different meanings to differing people. As a member of the Black church for nearly three decades I think we are often misunderstood. What evangelicals are speaking against in social justice is not the same thing the Black church is a proponent of. I think evangelicals and most of the Black churches are talking apples and oranges in the conversation on social justice.

Blacks are only twelve percent of the US population and have always lived under systemic racism and a sense of being treated as second class citizens. Subsequently, even in the universal church, the Black church has been misunderstood and devalued. No matter to which theology one subscribes, it is impossible to eliminate the social justice of the Black church. In this paper I will show that evangelicals are talking about a form of social justice that is not synonymous to the social justice of the Black Church. And the church including the Black church has a responsibility to practice biblical social justice.

Chapter 2

THE DEFINITION OF SOCIAL JUSTICE

Defining Social Justice

While the term social justice has become a convoluted one today, it is clearly defined throughout many passages of Scripture. Though the Scriptures don't speak directly of social justice, they do speak of the justice of God. Before we define social justice,[1]we will define biblical justice. Jesus quoted the Prophet Isaiah (Is 61: 1-3) when he talked about taking care of the poor, prisoners, the blind, and the oppressed (Luke 4: 18-19). According to Luke, Jesus was claiming to be the long-awaited Messiah. He was anointed to bring justice for the poor, prisoners, blind, and oppressed. [2] This is just one example of God's idea of justice. Where there were people suffering through injustices, the Messiah was coming to bring justice to them, to right their wrongs. Though Isaiah was probably speaking of Israel returning from exile, Jesus was initially speaking of Jews, and eventually everyone.

According to the Lexham Bible Dictionary, justice is defined as “ Divinely righteous action, whether taken by humanity or God, that promotes equality among humanity. Used in relation to uplift the righteous and oppressed and debasing the unrighteous and oppressors.” [3] With this biblical definition of justice, it is clear that bringing justice was one of the many roles of the Messiah. Also, justice is one of the “ attributes of God.”[4]So, justice in the world is important to God. According to the ESV, Dt 32: 4 says, “ *The Rock, his work is perfect, for all his ways are justice. A God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and upright is he.*”

God moved to restore justice often when there was a violation of justice. His intervention in the world was to make things right. In the first sin, Adam violated the Word of God when he ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Adam covered himself with leaves (Gn 3: 7), but God covered him with animal skin (Gn 3: 21). ^[5] That was God meeting the demands of justice for the sin of Adam.

According to Tony Evans, social justice is the people of God bringing “*the equitable and impartial application of the rule of God’s moral law in society.*” Social justice follows the pattern established by the Almighty God in making the wrongs of society right. Social justice is performed through economic, political, social, or criminal justice to name a few areas.^[6] Any given church will find a unique cultural context in which it operates. The economic factors, politics, social, and criminal conditions within each church context will vary. Though the conditions vary, the goal does not. The goal is to make right the wrongs of the community surrounding a church.

Darrin Patrick calls adapting the presentation of the gospel contextualization. The adaptation to the unique factors of a community is critical to doing social justice. However, the message of the gospel is not compromised in contextualization. Social Justice is correcting the wrong within that local context without compromising the essential message of the gospel. For instance, a church operating within food deserts would not seek to do social justice identically to another church in a community where gentrification is high or the murder rate is high.^[7] Contextualization in social justice as in presentation of the gospel is done to increase evangelical effectiveness within the given community.

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According to Fredrick Douglass, an abolitionist, “ Power concedes nothing without a demand.” The church therefore makes its demands of society based on its power as ambassadors of the kingdom of God (Mt 28: 19). Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. shared a thought along those same lines when he said, “ When a people are mired in oppression, they realize deliverance when they have accumulated the power to enforce change.” He further stated, “ We must develop, from strength, a situation in which the government finds it wise and prudent to collaborate with us.[8]

Heretofore, we have discussed what social justice is. It is also important to establish what social justice is not. The term “ social justice” is not homogenous to everyone who uses it. Many things are included by different people under the umbrella of social justice. Therefore, it is necessary, from our perspective, to define what social justice is not.

Defining what Social Justice is not.

As stated earlier, social justice is a convoluted term. According to John MacArthur, the term social justice is under pressure to include: “ critical race theory, feminism, intersectional theory, LGBT advocacy, progressive immigration, policies, animal rights, and other left-wing political causes.”[9]Tony Evans echoed John MacArthur in that everything cannot be included in the realm of biblical social justice. Biblical social justice must not violate biblical standards established by God.[10]

Anything that cannot be biblically defended should not and does not fit under the umbrella of social justice. Within the Black church, the definition of social justice does not include everything that affects the Black community. When

John MacArthur and other conservative evangelical leaders speak against left-wing liberalism, they are not speaking against the social justice concerns of the Black church. Much of the Black church is conservative even across Christian denominations.[11]

Neither is social justice a social gospel. The social gospel movement began to spread at the beginning of the twentieth century. Through people like Walter Rauschenbusch, who wrote a book “ *Christianity and the Social Crisis* ” and others, the social gospel movement began to grow. [12] Rauschenbusch believed that Christians were to try “ to limit the unbridled power of runaway capital,” and to fight for laws and policies that brought justice and equity for the poor.[13]

According to Al Mohler, President of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Walter Rauschenbusch was also in favor of a “ new evangelism” as opposed to the “ old evangelism.” It seems that Rauschenbusch was no longer for a salvation through faith in alone in Christ alone, but for a “ new evangelism,”“ which was about salvation from social ills and injustice in order to realize, at least partially, the Kingdom of God on earth.”[14] Therefore, social justice should not be confused with social gospel. Conservative evangelicals who reject this form of social gospel are right to do so but must not confuse it with biblical “ social justice.”

The government is ordained by God, and God expects people to follow the direction of the government even when they don't agree with the government. However, according to Norman Geisler, there are times when the Christian community should not obey the government of the land. There

are times when, though the government is ordained by God, the government is steeped in evil policies and actions.[15]It is a major mistake to assume that since the government is ordained by God that its practices will be just. [16]Social justice is therefore not a careless protest of government. It is, however, a careful objection to unbiblical government policies and practices.

Social justice is not blind support for random issues, but prayerful people contending for the righteousness of God. Those issues that confront the church are relevant because there is an inherent violation of the principles of God. Anything that threatens the freedom of or attempts to oppress God's people, stripping them of their God-given rights, is reason for social justice. [17]

Social justice in the Black church is not outside of a gospel centered message. What others have considered the gospel has been expanded. Not only is the gospel of Jesus Christ about the virgin birth of Christ, the death, burial, resurrection, and ascension of Christ, but it is also about the liberation of his followers. James Cone authored a statement addressing "black theology":

Black Theology is a theology of black liberation. It seeks to plumb the black condition in the light of God's revelation in Jesus Christ, so that the black community can see that the gospel is commensurate with the achievement of black humanity.... The message of liberation as the revelation of God is revealed in the incarnation of Jesus. Freedom is the gospel. Jesus is the liberator![18]

While the liberation theology of James Cone had major shortcomings, his statement resonates with the flavor of social justice in the Black church today. I was surprised to learn that Tony Evans was heavily influenced by the teaching of James Cone.[19]

In the parable of the “ Good Samaritan” (Luke 10: 25-37), a man was robbed, stripped, beaten, and left on the ground half dead. After two religious leaders did nothing about the man’s condition, a Samaritan helped him. The Samaritan saw injustice and was compelled with compassion to do something about the beaten man’s condition. Every one of the man’s conditions were addressed by the Samaritan. Jesus concluded the parable with “ You go, and do likewise.” As Jesus met the needs of the people, by feeding the hungry, giving sight to the blind, healing the sick, causing the lame to walk, so must the church of this age meet the needs of this present age.[20]Social Justice is not a new gospel, but an extension of what the gospel entails.

Chapter 3

Race Relations in America

The Role of Race Relations in the US Church

From the inception of what would become the United States of America race relations has been a major factor. The new immigrants from Europe that made up the thirteen colonies saw themselves as superior to the native Americans and the enslaved Africans they imported like cargo from Africa. They intended to conquer the territories of the American Indians as a new frontier as if the land was not already occupied.[21]The enslaved Africans

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were bred, traded, and sold just as cattle or livestock; They were never seen as human beings. Neither the American Indians nor the enslaved Africans were viewed as people to be respected; They were only a means to economic advancement for the Europeans migrants.[22]

Later, in March 1857, in the Dred Scott decision, the courts determined that the founding fathers never intended for the enslaved Africans to become citizens of the country. It was even argued that the enslaved Africans were inferior and therefore had “ no rights which the white man was bound to respect.”[23] Though the Dred Scott decision was nearly eighty years after the US had declared independence from British tyranny, little had changed in respect to the treatment of the enslaved Africans.

Meanwhile the church in America had begun to thrive in the thirteen colonies and, eventually, the independent United States of America. The church, especially in the South, was led by leaders who also participated in the owning, trading, and breeding of enslaved Africans. Furthermore, the Ku Klux Klan believed that Jews, Catholics, and Blacks were outside of the ideal for a white, Protestant, democratic nation.[24] Though it is hard to imagine how the early church in America did not denounce the enslavement of Africans, it was the cultural norm.

Additionally, the enslaved Africans were thought to be less than human, not able to learn, and not capable of salvation because they did not have souls. [25] And the Bible was used as a source of authority for the justification of the enslavement of Africans. Since the Americans did not understand the religion of the Africans, they considered it African paganism which further

justified slavery. The inferiority of the dark-skinned Africans was even further justified because of a mythical curse of Ham who was supposedly the father of all black people. Therefore, the enslavement of Africans was the will of God as punishment for Ham and his descendants.[26]

As the American church continued to develop, it was slow to develop in race relations. Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. described the condition of White America as “congenital deformity.” He suggests that racism is at the root of the American culture. It has been for so long that it barely registers in the conscience of the American people. Though Dr King does acknowledge that many White Americans have tried to eradicate racism, it has not been enough to counter the lasting effects racism. Even in the 1960’s, racism was more subtle but was still widely practiced in America. It was still very much woven into the American tapestry.[27]

The church was not idly standing by in race relations. It was implicit in preaching that enslaved Africans were inferior. Science said the negro was inferior, politics said it, and later the church said it too.[28] Even when the White church did not directly preach the inferiority of other people, it was implicit, because, like with slavery, it did not denounce the teaching. Dr Tony Evans added, “if Christian whites had developed the same energy toward protecting the rights of the newborn slave because of his or her value before God that they have devoted toward protecting the unborn baby today, the church would have set a standard that most certainly would have changed race relations in America.”[29]

Many of those held as great leaders of this country were implicit in the furtherance of horrible treatment of American Indians and Africans.

Indentured servants from Europe could gain freedom within a few years of migrating to the new land.[30] However, leaders like George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, even Abraham Lincoln were responsible, because of the position as leaders for the mistreatment of American Indians and enslaved Africans. Though Abraham Lincoln eventually fought the abolition of slavery, he did so while holding to a view of superiority over the enslaved Africans. [31]

It is not only political leaders who were culpable in the mistreatment of anyone deemed inferior, but church leaders also. There was more concern for their economics than for the salvation of the enslaved people. It was the clergy who solved the problem of status of baptized slaves when they encouraged legislation that upheld baptized slaves as still slaves.[32]

Not much changed over the subsequent two hundred years. The church of America was still implicit in racism. Blacks were treated as inferior people even when they attended worship with white congregations. Even in their seminaries only white Christians were welcome. Southern Baptist Theological Seminary did not allow Black students until 1940. Dallas Theological Seminary did not enroll Black students until the late 1960's or early 1970's.

Even when evangelicals call for change, it was primarily in individuals. Their form of evangelical teaching did not address social change. In "*Divided by Faith*," Emerson and Smith state, "Evangelicals usually fail to challenge the

system not just out of concern for evangelism, but also because they support the American system and enjoy its fruits.”[33]

The Difference in the Diversity of Churches

The church in America was diverse. Not only was there diversity in the churches according to the denominations, but there was also diversity among the northern and southern churches. Because of the Industrial Revolution and the emergence of liberalism, the church split into many groups. Each group competing and defining Christianity from their own perspectives.[34]Included in this discussion was the diversity of Black and White churches in America.

Northern churches were more intellectual and sophisticated. Whereas within the southern churches an anti-intellectualism and conservatism developed.

[35]The Northern churches were better in race relations than the southern churches, but they were still racist. Eventually, among the northern churches, there was a determination that slavery was wrong. The first organization formed against slavery was founded in Philadelphia in 1775.

Though the northern churches wanted slavery to be abolished, they were not completely comfortable with the enslaved Africans. They no longer wanted to see them enslaved, but also wanted them to leave their colonies.[36]

Southern white churches continued through the Jim Crow era with the same racist practices, teaching, and preaching as they had always done. Southern churches were reliant upon slaves for the stability of the economy. The North had been less reliant upon slave labor.[37]Later, the southern churches because of racism used stationed “ color guards” to bar black worshippers directing them to a suitable congregation on the other side of the tracks.

[38]Even in 1972, members of a local church in Dallas Tx made it clear to Dr Tony Evans that he and his wife were not welcome to join their church nor even worship there.[39]

Again, the Black man, formerly enslaved African, was viewed as inferior to Whites. Consequently, there was an inherent perceived inferiority of Black Christians. The Black church had its inception under the oppression of slavery and racism. Unlike the White church that was developed in America with the desire to be free from British oppression, the Black church was founded with the idea that the only freedom they would experience was in the afterlife.[40]

Since education was mostly non-existent in the Black community, their churches were led by leaders without commensurate education of White leaders. Unlike other denominations, Baptists and Methodists had little to no education. If there was a perceived call from God on their lives they were used to preach and teach.[41]Yet today, there is not as much an emphasis on education in Black churches as there is in churches of other racial groups. Almost 150 years after the founding of colleges in the 13 Colonies, Blacks began to start their own colleges.[42]

Blacks who had only been welcomed to sit in the rear or balcony of white churches were encouraged to leave during the Jim Crow era.[43]Eventually, Richard Allen, a free man, founded the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church. Too many conflicts with the North American Methodist Church caused Richard Allen to launch their own new denomination. By 1865, after

the Civil War, Black Christians began to leave White churches and form more of their own denominations.

Black denominations started as early as 1816. Though the Black church did not have nearly as many denominations as other ethnicities, they had many. By 1915 the Black Baptists had grown to 6.5 million members. Church of God in Christ and Pentecostals were other major denominations of the Black church.[44]

CHAPTER 4

THE ROLE OF THE BLACK TO THE BLACK COMMUNITY

Historical Role of the Black Church

The Black preacher from the days of slavery and later the with the inception of the Black church both have always played a vital role in their communities. Great leaders like Frederick Douglas, Harriet Tubman, Booker T Washington, and W. E. B. DuBois were a few of the many leaders who played a major part in leading Black people. Not all of them were preachers, but many of them were.[45] According to Howard Thurman, “ The ante-bellum Negro preacher was the greatest single factor in determining the spiritual destiny of the slave community.” The Black preacher inspired the enslaved community to hope in a future that was different than their existential circumstances. Though he was limited in power, mobility, ability, substantive opportunities he had one great thing in his favor he believed that God was Father of every human being. The slave and the master belonged to God, according to the enslaved preacher.[46]

When the preacher delivered his message to the enslaved people, he knew them intimately. He knew what was going on in their lives. He knew how hard it was to be in their position because he too, was in their position. No matter how depressing their situations were, he was inspired to give them hope for a brighter day. He wanted to encourage them, “ You are not slaves, you are not ‘ niggers’; you are God’s children.”[47]He raised their expectations and their understanding of who they were.

Evans Crawford referenced the challenge of the Black preacher when he talked about the philosophy of W. E. B. Dubois, the “ warring sense of twoness” in Black people. The Black man and woman see themselves through two different lenses. They see themselves through the lens of America that does not fit them, and they see themselves through their own lens. And the preacher who would preach to those people would do so with the ability to extract the good out of any situation.[48]Again, the Black preacher relates to their plight in America.

Present Day Role of the Black Church

The Black Church, like any other church has the primary responsibility of bringing glory to God through making disciples that will reach the lost (Mt 28: 18-20). In this post post-modern era, the challenge of the church is more difficult. The church is no longer as relevant as it once was in American society. The Black preacher is not revered today as he was a few decades ago. Yet with all those challenges, the Black church still fills a huge void in its community.

Perhaps the lives of some Black Americans is as good as it has ever been. Yet, there is still much room for improvement. There is still a huge disparity in the treatment of People of Color and Whites in the United States of America.

It was Martin Luther who taught the doctrine of two kingdoms. “ He asserted: ‘ There are two kingdoms, one the kingdom of God, the other the kingdom of the world.’”[49]According to Luther, the church has the responsibility of working in both kingdoms. One on hand, the church does the work of the church, on the other hand, it does work to make the message of the gospel relevant to world in which it exists.

As stated earlier, the gospel and “ social action” or social justice are not synonymous, but they are closely related. John Stott stated it as “ Salvation is not socio-political liberation.” However, Stott emphasized social action in the mission of the church.[50]Tony Evans argued that taking social justice extremes are problematic on both fronts. It is unacceptable to confuse the gospel with social justice but it’s also unacceptable to “ eliminate social concern completely from the scope of the gospel.”[51]

During the civil rights movement, the Black church along with other Christians were at the forefront of the fight for social justice. The systemic racism of America had evolved but had not been dissolved. In the 1950’s, though millions of Blacks had migrated out of the South, and had experienced upward mobility, there was still segregation and discrimination. It was the Black preacher and the political organizing of the Black church that forged ahead to bring change and justice to the oppressed poor people

of America. Without their diligence and perseverance there would not have been nearly as much social progress in the Black and poor communities.

From my perspective, as a local pastor in 97% Black community, the church is still critical to the way of life. No one from outside the community understands how to minister to it. The Black church offers “ comprehensive ministry to the whole of humanity without compromising the Word of God.” In the past, people evangelized the enslaved African without addressing his existential temporal reality.[52]The Black church is not effective offering a salvation that brings no hope of addressing their housing, employment, education, social, economic, political, etc. problems.[53]

Chapter 5

Conclusion

On the East side of the Washington Monument stands a reflecting pool. It is over 2000' long and it is designed to reflect the Washington Monument. On a really clear day it clearly reflects the Monument. Likewise, the people of God are made in His image to reflect Him (Gen 1: 27). All that God is should be reflected in His people. Whether those people be are Black, White, Hispanic or Asian, as Christians, they should reflect His Image, the Imago Dei.

The God of the Bible is a God of justice. The church in America has historically been responsible for many injustices. The church is the body of Christ and should reflect the God it professes as its head. The church then should reflect the justice of God. The Black church was originally founded in times of oppression. And overcoming systemic oppression is in its DNA. As

ambassadors of the God of the universe, the Black church confronts systemic oppression and other social justice concerns. Like any other church, when it confronts injustice, the Black church is fulfilling its call to ministry.

Though the Black church may operate in a context that is outside that of others, it is not preaching a new gospel. It is not preaching a social justice. The Black church is however, operating with an understanding of liberation as the result of salvation. It is not a social gospel, but the gospel with results for its constituents.

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