Justifying Advocacy

A biblical and theological rationale for speaking the truth to power on behalf of the vulnerable

The John Saunders Lecture 2011

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Introduction—on justifying advocacy

Giving the John Saunders lecture is something of a daunting privilege—particularly given that I want to speak about advocacy, something for which he is justly renowned. Indeed, many early advocates for the humane treatment of indigenous Australians and of their rights came from the ranks of evangelical Christians such as John Saunders (1806-1859) and Lancelot Edward Threlkeld (1788-1859), a tradition maintained in Peter Adams' 2009 Saunders lecture.[1] This tradition of evangelical Christian action in advocacy on behalf of the poor and disadvantaged is one to which I am committed, largely through the Micah Challenge campaign which has given a voice to many of us who've been committed to engaging with the 'powers that be' on behalf of the poor.[2]

Given this tradition, my commitment to it and my interest in thinking theologically, it seemed only reasonable to sketch a theological rationale for advocacy: especially given that most of the rationales for *advocacy* have not been *theological*, but focused on the practical value of advocacy for bringing about sustainable transformation for poor and oppressed communities;[3] and most of the *theological* rationales have been broadly focused on social engagement (assuming the legitimacy of advocacy as one *strategy* amongst many) rather than looking at advocacy *per se*.[4] Hence my desire to present a *theological* account of *advocacy*. But there are challenges that must be addressed especially for those, like me, who are committed to the task for broadly theological reasons.

Critics to the left of me, critics to the right

There are those who question the theological legitimacy of the whole enterprise—something of a problem for *theologically* justifying advocacy. From the theological right, the claim is made that our mission is the gospel—especially the verbal proclamation of the gospel—and that justice and advocacy are other people's business. These were, in fact, almost the very words used to me by a Christian worker on university campuses. All sorts of people, they said, are concerned about justice; only Christians care about the gospel, and so while being kind to the poor is a valuable mark of Christian discipleship, the proclamation of the gospel so as to call people to faith in Jesus should be our (sole) priority in mission.[5]

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[1] See John Saunders, '"Claims of the Aborigines": a sermon preached by the Rev John Saunders, Bathurst Street Baptist Church, Sydney, 14 October 1838', *The Colonist*, 17, 20, 24 October 1838; Henry Reynolds, *This Whispering in our Hearts* (St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1998): esp. Chs.2-3.

[2] For more on the campaign, see http://www.micahchallenge.org.au/ (accessed 10/10/2011) and associated links.

[3] So, for instance, Jayakumar Christian, 'The Nature of Poverty and Development' in *Another Way to Love*, ed. T. Costello and R. Yule (Brunswick East: Acorn, 2009): 23-34; Gary A. Haugen, 'Integral Mission and Advocacy' in *Justice, Mercy and Humility: The papers of the Micah Network International Consultation on Integral Mission and the Poor (2001)*, ed. T. Chester (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2002): 187-200; Robert Davis, 'What about justice? Toward an Evangelical perspective on advocacy in development', *Transformation* 26 (2009): 89-103. For an interesting analysis of the use of Scripture in two advocacy organisations, see David McIlroy, 'The Use of the Bible by the Christian Human Rights Organizations Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) and International Justice Mission (IJM)', *Political Theology* 11 (2010): 466-78.

[4] See Con Apokis et al., *Christians: Catalysts for Change* (Brunswick East: Acorn, nd [1994?]); Tim Chester, *Good News to the Poor: Sharing the gospel through social involvement* (Leicester: IVP, 2004); Tim Costello and Rod Yule, ed., *Another Way to Love* (Brunswick East: Acorn, 2009); Graham Gordon, *What if you got involved? Taking a stand against social injustice* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2003); Jamie A. Grant and Dewi A. Hughes, ed., *Transforming the World? The gospel and social responsibility* (Nottingham: Apollos, 2009); Dewi A. Hughes and Matthew Bennet, *God of the Poor: A Biblical Vision of God's Present Rule* (Carlisle: OM Publishing, 1998); Dewi A. Hughes, *Power and Poverty: Divine and human rule in a world of need* (Nottingham: IVP, 2008); Robert A. Kelly, 'The theology of the cross and social ministry', *Currents in Theology and Mission* 10 (1983): 95-99; Charles Ringma, 'Holistic ministry and mission: a call for reconceptualization', *Missiology* 32 (2004): 431-48; Christopher J H Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's grand narrative* (Nottingham: IVP, 2006); and on political engagement more generally, see Luke Bretherton, *Christianity and Contemporary Politics: The Conditions and Possibilities of Faithful Witness* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

From the left, perhaps surprisingly, there are also those who question the theological legitimacy of the whole enterprise. Their concerns are, of course, quite different. For them the issue is power—the illegitimacy of Christians using power in God's name. These were, in fact, almost the very words used to me at a conference I attended by a Christian worker in an urban slum. Christians are called in imitation of Christ, they said, to incarnational identification with the poor in their weakness and vulnerability. Such a gospel commitment eschews the top-down exercise of power for the bottom-up service of weakness so as to bring about transformation by and through and for the poor and their communities.

And so with critics to the left of me and critics to the right, I seem to be stuck in the middle. And that, theologically, can be a fairly barren place to be stuck. Most of the biblical justifications I have seen have been thin and fragmentary. A matter of scooping up a few textual gems without regard to their context—such as Micah 6:8, or Proverbs 31, or Matthew 23—or grabbing a few textual threads from the books of Esther or James and tossing them together as a biblical justification.[6]

Some, indeed, have been misguided. I'm not, for instance, convinced that Esther is a good place to go to justify advocacy. Apart from issues relating to the violence of both the threat and Esther's response, Esther does not address the kind of advocacy I'm seeking to justify. Esther speaks as a Jew—admittedly one with a position of power and privilege—on behalf of her own people—admittedly in a context of marginalisation and powerlessness. Nonetheless, she advocates on behalf of *her own people*, those who share ethnic and religious and even geographical ties with her as an exiled Jew. And there is, of course, a place for that—say, expatriate Tibetans speaking about the plight of their country under Chinese rule, or expatriate Karens or Chins (or Congolese, or Somalis, or…) speaking about the plight of their country under domestic rule, or the Voice of the Martyrs speaking on behalf of persecuted Christians across the world. There is a place for that kind of lobbying,[7] but that is not what I want to examine in this address.

What I want to examine is the role of the Church as representatives of God and God's mission in the world 'speaking the truth to power' on behalf of the poor. And I want to do a bit better than a bit of piecemeal proof-texting or exegetical special pleading, and I believe there are biblical and theological resources for doing so. After all, a mission focused on the Kingdom of God, one reflecting God's own mission in the world and agenda for it, necessitates the gospel—a gospel in all its fullness which means, of course, it being good news for the poor.

Further, while costly identification with the marginalised (what is often called 'incarnational' ministry[8]) is a legitimate form of mission there are others; for the gospel of both the Old and

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[5] So also Jim Harries, ''Material Provision' or Preaching the Gospel: Reconsidering 'Holistic' (Integral) Mission', *Evangelical Review of Theology* 32 (2008): 257-70; David J. Hesselgrave, *Paradigms in Conflict: 10 Key Questions in Christian Missions Today* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2005): 117-39.

[6] See, for instance, Leslie Nathaniel, 'Church and Advocacy' in *Gospel and Globalisation*, ed. A. Watkins and L. Nathaniel (Delhi: ISPCK, 2006): 69-74

[7] For the distinction between lobbying and advocacy, see Con Apokis et al., *Christians: Catalysts for Change* (Brunswick East: Acorn, nd): 1-3.

[8] Despite its currency in much contemporary missiology (e.g., Michael Frost, *The Road to Missional* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011): esp. 121-40), I believe that 'incarnational' is an unhelpful label for some useful emphases and

New Testaments, I will claim, calls for the just and responsible use of power. This may, indeed, mean its renunciation, but not always. So let me attempt to move beyond fragments and threads to develop a coherent biblical framework that justifies advocacy.[9]

Framework not fragments

My plan is to outline a biblical-theological framework which aims to justify advocacy as calling on power to be used justly for the poor, one in which many of the threads and fragments of the usual piecemeal approaches find their setting. This will involve, in the first instance, reminding ourselves of God's passion for the poor and God's passion to see justice done. As such, I will aim to show that God is both the chief advocate *for* the poor and the chief one we address when we advocate on their behalf: praise (Pss 97, 146) and prayer (Luke 18:1–8) are key elements in this framework.

Second, I will seek to (briefly) articulate a theology of (political) power and authority, in which power is seen as a gift given to a community *through* a person of power *for* those without it. As such I will aim to show that power, while it can be abused, can also be used on behalf of the poor, and that we therefore have a responsibility to hold the wielders of power accountable to those for whose sake they have been given it (Psalm 72).

Third, I aim to show that our voice is a God-given gift and responsibility—an expression of power, really—which we must use for God's glory and in service of the poor (James 5:1–6).

God and advocacy

Let me begin where any Christian theology ought to begin: the God whom we know and worship through Jesus Christ. It is clear from the opening chapters of Scripture that God is committed to a world of justice and delight and that this is reflected in God's design for creation, God's work in judging human sin and seeking to redeem a broken world and broken humanity, in God's design for a renewed humanity, first in Israel, then in Jesus and through him and his Spirit in the Church as a (broken but real) sign of the coming kingdom in which God's design will be fully realised. But that is a tale well told elsewhere; and here my focus is on the question of *advocacy*. And so my concern is for us to think about how the practices of praise and prayer as exemplified, say, in Psalm 146 and Luke 18 contribute to our understanding of advocacy.

I would like to look at two texts that illustrate this—not as fragments arbitrarily grabbed for a rhetorical purpose, but as indicators of God's role in the story as the one who addresses us and is addressed by us in advocacy for the poor in the context of praise and petition. For central to the *praise* of God is God's commitment to speak and act for the victims of injustice, as is seen in one of the oldest known songs in Scripture the 'Song of the Sea' in Exodus 15, Hannah's famous

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commitments. See Tim Chester, 'Why I don't believe in incarnational mission', http://timchester.wordpress.com/2008/07/19/why-i-dont-believe-in-incarnational-mission/; accessed 17/10/2011.

[9] For a helpful articulation of the 'political hermeneutics' at work in my discussion, see Richard Bauckham, *The Bible in Politics: How to read the Bible politically* (London: SPCK, 1989); also my earlier work on ethics, Andrew Sloane, *At Home in a Strange Land: Using the Old Testament in Christian Ethics* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2008).

song in 1 Samuel 2 (and its even more famous echo in Mary's Magnificat in Luke 2), through to some of the last songs sung in Scripture in Revelation 7:15–17 and Revelation 19:1–2.

Of course, as we think about God, justice and praise, the logical place to turn is the book of Psalms, specifically, Psalm 146.[10] As is clear from the opening and closing verses of this Psalm, this is a Psalm of praise, a hymn that identifies key qualities of God that show that God is worthy of our praise. More than that, it is strategically located towards the end of the book of Psalms, helping to shape the climax of the book's journey from obedience to praise. It is the first of five great 'hallel' Psalms which end with the exultant cry 'let everything that has breath praise Yahweh'—and helps us to see why we should join in this praise. For in the face of the frailties and failures of human power (Ps 146:3–4), Yahweh is the one whose power is limitless and indefatigable, whose kingdom will rule forever and in whom we can safely trust (5–6, 10).

But Yahweh is more than the wielder of superior and trustworthy power; Yahweh is the wielder of a superior *kind* of power, a power to which we should willingly and joyfully submit, a power we can freely and fully trust. For the God we praise—the (only) God worthy of praise, is the God who works justice forever; the one who cares for the weak and the vulnerable (v.7). *This* God, contrary to all our expectations of the exercise of earthly power, uses God's uncontainable power for those who stand to benefit from it, those in greatest need of aid. This God releases exiled Israel and cares for the socially, geographically, economically displaced and vulnerable (aliens, widows and orphans). This is the God who acts for the poor and whose word—even the word of praise—speaks on their behalf.[11] This vision of God shapes our praise, brings us to the climax of the journey of faith and shapes our wanderings on the way.

It also, of course, shapes our prayer. God's concern for justice is equally central to the way Scripture shapes *petition* to God. This is clear in one of the oldest recorded prayers in Scripture, that of Abraham in Genesis 19 (shall not the judge of all the earth do what is right/just?); it is reflected in the cries of Israel that prompt God to act in the Exodus; the same cries of the poor that prompt God's judgement in Israel's history and which shape so many of the (lament) Psalms (7, 10 and 12, to take three early examples). It is echoed in one of the last petitions recorded in Scripture, the cry of the martyrs under the throne in Revelation 6 (and even in the very last, Maranatha, which is, I would suggest, a longing cry for the judge of all the earth to finally do what is right). Our advocacy for the poor is first addressed *to God* before it is addressed on God's behalf to those in power.[12]

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[10] For more on the Psalter and Psalm 146 in particular, see Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984); Craig G. Broyles, *Psalms* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1999); Geoffrey W. Grogan, *Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008); John Goldingay, *Psalms 1-41* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006); *Psalms 42-89* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007); *Psalms 90-150* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008); Philip S. Johnston and David G. Firth, ed., *Interpreting the Psalms: Issues and Approaches* (Leicester: Apollos, 2005); James C. McCann, 'Psalms' in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 4, ed. L. E. Keck (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996): 639-1280; James Mays, L, *Psalms* (Louisville: W/JKP, 1994).

[11] A word here on the way in which praise is both God's word and ours is in order here. Praise is, in the first instance, human words addressed to God—as is true also of prayer and other Scriptural words by which the people of God address God. The praises (and prayers, etc) we find in the Psalms, however, are part of the canon of Scripture, and so are included in the words God gives to us. They are, I would suggest, now divinely endorsed and appropriated as ways God addresses us as people of faith, instructing us in how we can appropriately relate to (and so speak with) God. In this sense they are both human words addressing God and divine words addressing us. For a useful discussion of this which, however, fails to understand Psalms as words given by God to us as authorised forms of address directed to God see Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical reflections on the claim that God speaks* (Cambridge: CUP, 1995).

[12] For fascinating reflections on suffering, injustice, prayer and liturgy, see 'Liturgy, justice, and tears', *Worship* 62 (1988): 386-403; and for specific reflections on Psalms 10 and 126, see Bauckham, *The Bible in Politics*: 53-72.

There are many texts about prayer that I could look at in this regard. Psalm 82 would be fascinating example, consisting as it does of an accusation brought by God against the 'powers' (be they understood as pseudo-divine rivals in the heavenly assembly or powerful humans in the earthly one) and their unjust abuses (vv.1–7), followed by a petition that God so act *now* (v.8). My focus, however, will be on Jesus' teaching his disciples to always pray and not give up in Luke 18:1–8. Luke's gospel, as is well known, has a sustained interest in the poor and Jesus' words and actions on their behalf—it is Luke's gospel that presents Jesus' kingdom program, after all, as proclaiming good news to the poor and in which Jesus pronounces a blessing on the poor. What is often missed is that this interest is sustained in Jesus' teaching on perseverance in prayer here in chapter 18.[13]

It is worth noting the way that this is surrounded by passages that reflect Luke's emphasis on Jesus' ministry to seek and save (the least and) the lost (the parables in Luke 15; the parable of the rich man and Lazarus in 16; the parable of Pharisee and the tax collector, the blessing of children, the confrontation with the rich ruler in 18 and, of course, the saving of Zacchaeus in 19). But the immediate context is Jesus' warning in 17:20–37 of the inevitability of final judgement and the need for the disciples to be found alert and faithful when it comes. His teaching on prayer, then, aims to encourage that faithfulness as they wait for the end—a faithful trust in God that, in Jesus' view, is seen most clearly in our continuing to cry out for God to fulfil God's kingly purposes, rather than giving in to a cynical despair that says 'as was, so is now and ever shall be'.

But in the midst of all the humour and obscurity of elements of this parable, please note the *content* of both the widow's petition to the unjust judge and ours to the just Judge of all the earth: these are pleas for *justice*. Jesus tells us that what ought to sustain our prayer is a confident trust that the divine judge will work justice for those who trust the judge's justice. The sting at the end of his parable is, of course, the question of whether we will be found exercising faith in God's justice, or whether we have given up in a flabby acquiescence to the ways of the world.

For Jesus, exercising such faith involves pleading for justice on our own behalf as well as for others—it is a faith that recognises that the world is not as God would have it and which calls on God to act to bring it in line with the coming kingdom of God. The picture that emerges, then, from the praise and prayer of Scripture is of a God of inexhaustible power who is the initiator of the cause of justice and the one who responds to us in it. Which takes us, of course, to a theology of power.

A theology of power

Power—the ability to effect change in the (political and communal) world—and its correlate authority—the right to do so, however and from wherever it is derived—are fundamental and inescapable features of human life together.[14] No human communal life is imaginable without some forms of social power and authority and the institutions and practices that support and are governed by it. They may be more-or-less egalitarian or authoritarian in nature, but such patterns of decision making and implementation must exist for there to be any common life. From a biblical point of view, it doesn't seem to matter much what *forms* they take. From clan to kingdom to Persian or Roman province to the new (largely urban) communities of faith of the early church, the common life and social context of the believing community varies greatly.

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[13] The concern for justice is missed by a number of commentators, for which see, Darrell L Bock, *Luke* (NIV Application Commentary; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996); C. A. Evans, *Luke* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1990). Others, however, recognise it and the role it plays in Jesus' eschatological concerns, for which see, Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997); I.H. Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978); John Nolland, *Luke 9:21-18:34* (Dallas: Word, 1993).

[14] For this and much of the following argument, see Bauckham, *The Bible in Politics*: 41-52; Hughes and Bennet, *God of the Poor*: Ch.8.

What matters, it seems, is not the form (which seems to range from patriarchal familial patterns, through complex centralised monarchy to various forms of 'diaspora' community, none of which conform to our late modern democratic ideals), but the reasons for which power and authority are given, and the ends to which they are used. And to that, for all the variety of *form* of institutional power, the Scriptures seem to give clear and unequivocal witness.

Theologically, (political) power and authority are seen as gifts given to a community *through* a person of power *for* those without it. The primary reason (political) power is given is in order to establish ordered patterns of life together, in which those who gain advantages in the system are responsible to use their wealth and power (the advantages they accrue) for the benefit of those who become disadvantaged as a result of the operation of those patterns of common life.

Such an understanding of power is seen in the *Torah's* call to wealthy landowners to leave gleanings for the poor and its call to administer justice fairly; it is seen in the prophetic indictment of abuses of power from Elijah (1 Kings 21) through Amos to Zechariah; it is seen in Job's self-defence in chapter 31 and Ecclesiastes' despairing vision of a broken world; it is seen in Jesus' condemnation of abusive power (e.g., Matt 23:23) and even Paul's much misunderstood call to submit to the political structures of his day (Romans 13); it is evident in Revelation's stinging rebuke of the 'Babylon' of John's day. But perhaps the clearest articulation of this vision of power is seen in the 'charter of kingship' found in Psalm 72, to which I would like us now to turn, aiming to show that power, while it can be abused, can also be used on behalf of the poor, and we have a responsibility to hold the wielders of power accountable to those for whose sake they have been given it.

This is the last of a series of 'David's prayers', one which closes Book Two of the Psalter which focuses on David as man and king.[15] It sets up for us the ideal of human kingship which, as Psalm 2 notes, is meant to be an expression in earthly power of the rule of God. It is no surprise, then, that this 'job description for the king' is couched as a *prayer* to God, and one in which the king's exercise of justice is emphasised as one of the key blessings God can bestow on God's people (and the earth) through the human king. Clearly, the Psalm petitions (or at least expresses a wish for) the blessings of God: prosperity (lit: *shalom*, v.3 and also v.7); abundance (v.6, 15–16). But these blessings are tightly connected to the king reflecting God's own passion for justice, for using his earthly power for the weak and the vulnerable (v.2, v.7, 12–14), including dismantling the unjust powers and systems that oppress and exploit them (v.4b, 14).

Such an exercise of power, interestingly, will culminate in God fulfilling those promises originally given to Abraham and tied to God's purposes for Israel: the establishing of a great name, the gift of offspring and the abundance which characterises *shalom*, and the blessing of the nations through the blessing of God's chosen one. *This* is what power is for in God's economy: the bringing of blessing to the community for whom it is to be exercised through the establishing of justice, through the use of power to establish, restore and maintain right relationships in the community. This is how we are to use our power; this is the pattern by which all users of earthly power are held accountable by God.

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[15] For more on Psalm 72, see references cited earlier, as well as Marvin E. Tate, *Psalms 51-100* (Dallas: Word, 1990).

But, you might say, when we come to the NT we do not see a call to responsible exercise of power, but its renunciation in costly, suffering service. Does that not undercut all this OT stuff? Let me be clear: Jesus' understanding of his identity and mission is driven by the OT, including its picture of power and its use. Indeed, that is one thing that shapes his characteristic emphasis on power and position as opportunities for service (for, as we've seen, power in the OT is given *to* the community *through* those in authority; Jesus reinforces that). In my view this means that, while at times the NT overturns a basic pattern of OT faith (e.g., the way that purity or Temple and sacrifice work) we need to be very careful before we jettison the OT and its concerns and should only do so for very good reason.[16]

There is, in fact, very good reason to see the NT as endorsing the basic understanding of power I've outlined. John the Baptist, for instance, calls on those with economic and military power to use it well, not to renounce it (Luke 3:10–14); the leaders of the early Church exercised their power, or authority if you will, for the benefit of the community both socially (Acts 6) and theologically (Acts 15). Indeed, while there is a clear call in the NT to renounce power for suffering service, I would suggest such renunciation is because some ends for the poor can only be achieved through *powerlessness*; but that is not a universal phenomenon. Indeed, a failure to embrace the responsibilities of power can be an act of infidelity both to the God who gave it and the poor for whose benefit it was given.

Perhaps here *The Lord of the Rings* might give us useful parallels. The power of the Ring must be surrendered, as Boromir tragically failed to see; but the power of the king must be embraced in costly service, as Aragorn recognises. Indeed, Jesus' call for those in power to love in service is a call to the proper *Christomorphic* use of power: not for one's one benefit, but for that of the weakest and the least—the very reason power was given in the first place.[17] The renunciation of power, then, is *one* pattern we find in the NT; it is not the only one—witness James' advocacy for poor labourers to which we now turn.

The power of a voice

So finally we turn to what may have seemed like an obvious starting point (well, to anyone but an [OT] theologian anyway): the concern we find in Scripture that we use our voice in line with God's purposes—especially God's commitment to justice. This theme, too, runs right through Scripture, if we know where (and how) to look. It is, perhaps, most obvious in the great prophets of the Eighth Century BC, who were commissioned by God to voice God's revulsion at and rejection of Israel and Judah's sin and injustice. They, clearly, were authorised advocates of God's concern for the poor. But it is a concern that reaches back long before the corruption of the divided kingdom, and stretches out long after it: the *torah's* passion for justice entails speaking the truth on behalf of the poor; prophets like Jeremiah and Ezekiel and Zechariah advocate (on God's behalf) for the poor, as does Nehemiah. Micah 6:6–8 is not, it would seem, a text chosen at random, a scattered gem grabbed out of the wreckage to justify our concern for advocacy, but a crystallisation of this great OT witness to the power and responsibility of the people of God using their voice on behalf of the poor.

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[16] I discuss this at length elsewhere, for which see Sloane, *At Home in a Strange Land*

[17] In this regard it is important to remember that we are not to play God in the lives of poor communities, paternalistically determining the ways our power should be used on their behalf, but listen to the poor, giving them the power to determine how that power entrusted to us for their good ought to be used. On this see particularly, Jayakumar Christian, *God of the Empty-Handed: Poverty, Power and the Kingdom of God* (Monrovia, CAL: MARC, 1999): esp. Chs10-11; Christian, 'The Nature of Poverty and Development': 24-26. I should note, however, that (as I have made clear) I think he is mistaken to see Jesus as exercising a different kind of power to that of the OT.

But it is to the NT I would like us to turn—a portion of the Bible often seen to have a muted witness at best to the cause of advocacy, a perception that is frequently used to suggest that advocacy is no longer a legitimate *Christian* concern, even if it had been one for (some in) Israel. James 5:1–6, I would suggest, gives the lie to that claim.[18] The context of the letter shows us James' concern with faith and its outworking in the concrete life of the community and with true wisdom which is grounded in a proper fear of Yahweh. All of this is addressed to a community facing the reality of struggle and persecution, calling them to persevere in light of the coming Day of Yahweh (see 5:7ff). The passage directly addresses the rich. It is probable that, in light of James 2:1ff (and our knowledge of early Christian sociology) the rich are those outside the community of faith, in which case the struggling community rather than their rich oppressors would be the primary hearers of this text. The main 'rhetorical aim', then, would be to comfort suffering Christians and call them to faithful perseverance; but that, in turn, must be rooted in the actuality of the condemnation of the unjustly wealthy.

And James pulls no punches. He fiercely denounces careless, selfish, unjust luxury, both in light of the coming final judgement (vv.4–6) and the folly of such useless hoarding (v.2): the rotting of their riches probably speaks, not of the final judgement in which such wealth counts for nought; rather it speaks of the way unjust hoarding of wealth rather than just using it for the benefit of others and the community leads to its decay, being useful for nothing (dare one speak of the hoarding of shares and property and our intermittent financial crises?). This wealth, hoarded rather than distributed to those whose labour earned it, 'cries out' in language reminiscent of the cries of Israel in Egypt and comes to the ears of the Lord of Hosts, the God of battle who acts in history in judgement and salvation. This is a denunciation, not a call to repent (either because such a call is implicit or because it's seen as pointless in light the obvious gross wickedness of these people). The picture is of the fires of the last judgement licking through the cracks of reality, a warning of coming wrath. And it is a horrible fate: James speaks of 'miseries' (v.1), a rot which will 'eat your flesh like fire' (v.3), being fattened for a 'day of slaughter' (v.5—which is a clever, if brutal, use of irony, being both a description of rich self-indulgence and its reversal in eschatological judgement).

James is clear: Yahweh still acts in judgement against injustice—and will do so on the last day. And please note that there is nothing in the text to indicate that either the oppressed poor or the rich oppressors are *Christian*. James here seems to speak (on behalf of God) about a general pattern of injustice and abuse, not one confined to the 'people of God'. Furthermore, while the main rhetorical function of this stinging condemnation is the consolation of those within the community who are suffering and oppressed, chapter 2 suggests that such rich people may at times be present in the congregation, and so they are also directly addressed by this word of advocacy. Nonetheless, I do need to acknowledge that, in the main, the hearers of the NT did not have the kind of political power we take for granted in late modern democracies. It is all the more remarkable that we find as much there as we do; and it is clear that words such as James 5 tell us what we as Christian *would or should* say were we to have the kind of influence over policy and policy makers that we have today.

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[18] For more on James, including explicit rejections of Luther's (in)famous rejection of it as an 'epistle of straw', see Craig Blomberg and Mariam J. Kamell, *James* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008); Daniel M. Doriani, *James* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2007); Scot McKnight, *The Letter of James* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011); Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000); David P. Nystrom, *James* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997); Jim Reiher, *James: Peace activist and advocate for the poor* (Dandenong: UNOH, 2009).

Our voice, then, is a God-given gift and responsibility—an expression of power, really—which we must use for God's glory and in service of the poor. But I should note, in passing, that there are other modes of speech that we can address to those in power. There are fiery words of judgement such as in James; but there is also Philemon, a gentle word to a fellow believer with power over another that anticipates compliance and so evokes it. And the fiery, combative words may be addressed to unbelievers (as in James) or believers (as in Isaiah); and the invitation may be spoken to believers (as in Philemon) or unbelievers (as in Nehemiah 2); and in between there is a combination of rebuke and encouragement (as in Luke 3 and John's shaping of repentance).

There are also different horizons we may have in view in both judgement and salvation, the ultimate and the more immediate (as we see combined, for instance, in James). And there is a variety of tactics we can adopt that have theological legitimacy. We can seek to persuade those in power, projecting a moral vision they ought to adopt; we can warn them about consequences and warnings, speaking of the electoral consequences or regional security implications should they fail to act. In all of that we must remember that God is still the one who speaks, through the people of God, to those in power, calling them to account and to use their power for the purposes for which it was given.

A gospel-driven pattern for advocacy

So we see, then, that advocacy is justified: it arises out of our praise and prayer to God; it reflects God's purpose for power; it echoes the advocacy of God and God's people which resounds through Scripture. Now I would be the first to admit that this is framework is anything but comprehensive. Indeed, if what I've outlined is true, then *everything* that demonstrates God's concern for the poor and marginalised and our responsibility to act on their behalf feeds into justifying advocacy: the character of God; the shape of the story of God and the world; the nature of our creation in God's image and our growing into the image of the Son which the Spirit shapes in us as we struggle for justice and the gospel; the shape of community formed by God's saving and transforming grace; the new future towards which we head and which God seeks to form in us and through us by the power of the Spirit; the instructions that shape our view of the world and our living in it.[19]

This is advocacy grounded in the gospel—both in its form and content; this is advocacy which is justified theologically and which works by identification with the poor, carefully listening to their concerns and seeking to articulate them to the 'powers'. Such a use of our voice can be both a legitimate expression of the gospel, and a costly embodiment of it.[20]

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[19] For more on this, see Micah Challenge 'Is Poverty a Problem for God?', http://www.micahchallenge.org.au/poverty-a-problem-for-God; accessed 17/10/2011.

[20] I would like to thank my colleagues David Starling, Phill Marshall and Rod Benson for comments on this paper—and the Baptist Churches of NSW & ACT Social Issues Committee for the invitation to give this address.