

Poverty and Biblical Justice

In the Biblical view, justice is a state of equity and fairness, integrity and righteousness, peace and wholeness, at all levels of society – governments, courts and marketplace – that protects the rights and dignity of all, particularly the most vulnerable. Justice is not merely a desirable state, but requires all people (and particularly those with authority, or social and economic power) to act in such a way as to preserve and promote this state of justice and to restrain and punish those who would disrupt it. Without such attention and actions, the wealthy and powerful may capture or exploit aspects of governments, courts and markets for their own benefit and at the expense of those with less power. Or people in poverty might find themselves caught in entrenched poverty, insecurity, debt and vulnerability that leaves them with little hope or opportunity for change.

"Hear the word of the LORD, O King of Judah sitting on the throne of David – you, and your servants, and your people who enter these gates. Thus says the LORD: Act with justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor anyone who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood."

Jeremiah 22:1–3

Christians, in faithfulness to Jesus, seek to "love our neighbours as ourselves". We do this directly, in face to face encounters with our neighbours. We also love our neighbours indirectly by seeking to ensure that the laws and rules, systems and processes that operate in our economies and societies protect the rights and dignity of all, particularly the most vulnerable.

This is not only God's call on Christians, but on all people.

"He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" Micah 6:8

God's intention for all people

All people – women and men alike – are image-bearers of the true and living God, creative stewards of creation, with inherent dignity and worth.

So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. Genesis 1:27

God intends for all people to experience "abundant life", experiencing peace, wholeness and righteousness in their daily lives and in all their relationships – with one another at every level (locally, nationally and globally), with selves that are healed and made whole, with creation, and with God. The Old Testament speaks of this abundant life as *shalom*, a state of harmony and rightness in social relations, justice in the courts and the marketplace, of material sufficiency, peace and security in local communities and among the nations, a flourishing and productive creation, and of right relations with one's Creator.

"Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore; but they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid." Micah 4:3–4

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What is poverty?

Poverty is not merely a matter of money, or of living below an arbitrarily defined income line. Poverty is a multidimensional phenomenon. Poverty as a multidimensional phenomenon includes not merely low income or material deprivation, but also:

- silencing of the voices of people in poverty,
- denial of rights, respect and dignity for people in poverty,
- various forms of social and economic exclusion,
- marring or undermining the self-identities and self-worth of people in poverty.

In this way, poverty represents a subversion of the created dignity and worth of those made in God's image, and a denial of the abundant life which God desires for all. The Bible makes clear that God is deeply grieved by the dehumanising poverty which consigns women, men and children to violence and vulnerability, struggle and despair, and which stunts and prematurely ends the lives of tens of thousands of poor people every day.

Not merely is God grieved by poverty, but God is deeply angered by the arrogance, greed, indifference and deep-rooted injustice which cause it. The existence of poverty is not accidental, but is the result of human sin as some seek to dominate or exploit others, to claim for themselves – and exclude others from enjoying – material and social resources (wealth and power), and to create and enforce the rules and mechanisms that allow this to become self-perpetuating

In this way, some are enriched vastly beyond any just or sustainable measure while others are pushed towards and beyond the brink of survival. Further, this state of affairs is justified as either “natural” or in some way the fault of people in poverty, rather than deliberate exploitation of power to enrich and empower some at the expense of others.

“Woe to you who join house to house, who add field to field, until there is room for no one but you, and you are left to live alone in the midst of the land!” Isaiah 5:8

This inequality and injustice can be enacted at an interpersonal level – for example between employer and employee, large company and small supplier, landlord and tenant, but it can also be enacted at the level of social, political and economic systems and structures – such as politics, the courts and law enforcement, tax laws, or systems of international trade and finance – so that they work in favour of a powerful few and against the interests of less powerful people and groups. Sometimes this is a matter of the formal rules of the system which favour the wealthy and the powerful. Sometimes this is a matter of how the powerful make use of these systems to corrupt or turn them to their own advantage.

Acting against poverty and injustice

Christians are called to live and speak and act in line with this Biblical vision of “abundant life” for all and in line with God's Kingdom values of justice, mercy, generosity, love. This includes *being the church*, God's forgiven communities that are gathered and empowered to embody the right-side-up values of Jesus. It also includes speaking and acting out against systems and structures that make and keep people poor.

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"If you close your ear to the cry of the poor, you will cry out and not be heard."
Proverbs 21:13

Recognising the dignity and worth of all people, God's vision for all people to experience abundant life in every dimension, and God's call for all to *do* justice, Christians are called to stand against everything that degrades or denies people's dignity, that subverts God's vision for all to experience "abundant life" and that undermines a state of justice in society.

In our advocacy in this way, we are compelled and shaped by:

- *The character of God* – which is one of justice and a passionate concern for the poor and vulnerable, supremely demonstrated in the self-giving love of Jesus (Psalm 146:5–9; Jeremiah 9:23–24, 2 Corinthians 8:9).
- *The call of God* – to be a people created in Christ Jesus who bear witness to His grace and justice by living lives of self-giving love, seeking the good of all (Ephesians 2:1–10; Galatians 6:9–10).
- *The claim of God* – and the Lordship of Christ – over the whole world, over every nation and government, every culture and economy, calling these powers, institutions and authorities to take their proper place in submission to His just and gracious rule (Psalm 82; Matthew 27:18; Revelation 11:15).
- *The promise of God* – that injustice stands condemned, that in the fulfillment of God's kingly rule in Christ, suffering and mourning will be removed and healed, that all creation will be renewed; and that we are called to live faithfully, justly and mercifully in light of that in-breaking future here and now (Romans 8:18–25; Ephesians 6:10–17).

At the most basic level, we recognise that in order to live without poverty and inequality, people need to experience flourishing and fair systems across multiple dimensions. We believe that, critically at this time, the building blocks of communities and a world free from poverty and injustice are:

1. Communities and societies that are free from violence and violent conflict and in which people have personal security.
2. Governments and authorities at all levels that are accountable and responsive to the needs and rights of the poorest and most vulnerable groups.
3. Ecologies that are healthy, and which support sustainable flourishing for human beings and all of God's creation.
4. Economies that are productive, fair and inclusive.

In each domain, it is the poorest and least powerful people, who suffer the results of broken relationships and systemic injustice. In our advocacy we will speak out to challenge exclusion and injustice, exploitation and abuse, in each of these domains.