

Research Paper

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Biblical Theology of Justice

Social movements unite people to create or resist change. Through them, individuals seek a common voice to challenge social, political, economic, and cultural powers; social movements multiply the power of individual action through their unique form of collective, non-institutionalized power. A movement's consequences may be unpredictable (and sometimes counterproductive). Often, they fade away as suddenly as they appear. Yet, by participating in them, individuals can name and voice social discontent, expressing grievances that often are yet to register in the minds of those in the social mainstream. Moreover, movements enable their participants to fight established social structures, beliefs, and ideologies that, in their minds, perpetuate deception and injustice.¹ But, is there a place for the church in this? What are the Scriptures and theological undergirding for justice, equity, and belonging?

Firstly, Genesis 1:27 states that God created man in His own image; in the image of God, He created him; male and female, He created them. Humanity is, therefore, royal and equal in God's sight, irrespective of gender, age, ethnicity, and ableness. No one is above or below the other. The fact that God made us in His image means He values everyone. We belong. We all have a seat at the table.

Secondly, Leviticus 25 gives us a glimpse of justice, equality, and belonging. The NIV Life Application Study Bible notes that great emphasis here is placed on assisting the poor and defenseless, especially orphans, widows, and those with disabilities. There was no paid work available to women. Therefore, a widow and her children have no livelihood. Neither was there

¹ Gregory P. Leffel, *Faith Seeking Action: Mission, Social Movements, and the Church in Motion* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2007), 47-48.

work available for those with severe disabilities in the nation of farmers and shepherds. People experiencing poverty were to be helped without being charged any interest. Individual and family responsibility was crucial since there was no government aid. Permanent poverty was not allowed in Israel. Financially secure families were responsible for providing help and housing for those in need. God does not expect us to eradicate poverty or neglect our family while providing for others. But He expects when you see someone in need; you reach out with whatever help you can.

Thirdly, the book of Amos is a rich source of how God perceives justice. Amos, a poor and humble shepherd, traveled to Israel's worship centers to proclaim God's condemnation of their distorted values. In his book, we glimpse a God who immensely cares for the poor and His commitment to social and personal justice. Chapter 2: 6-8 reads, Thus says the Lord, "For three transgressions of Israel, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment, because they sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals—those who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth and turn aside the way of the afflicted; a man and his father go into the same girl so that my holy name is profaned; they lay themselves down beside every altar on garments taken in pledge, and in the house of their God they drink the wine of those who have been fined." In this passage, Amos addresses the upper class. There was no middle class, only rich and poor. The prophet revealed the shocking moral condition of the people. The rich oppressed the poor. The people in power displayed covetousness, immorality, and injustice. They had outward righteousness but were inwardly greedy and unjust as they took advantage of the helpless, holding them as enslaved people through debt. Chapter 5:11 says they trampled on the poor and exact taxes of grain. To this, a man from Judah, who himself

knew poverty, denounced the sins of Israel and promised judgment. Also, in Isaiah 61:8, the Bible says, "For I, the Lord, love justice; I hate robbery for burnt offering; I will direct their work in truth and will make with them an everlasting covenant."

In Psalm 72:1-2, the prayer is that David's heir will rule with righteousness and justice. In the first annual report, Dr. King printed in the Nation on the state of the civil rights movement, sadly, we see the opposite of what God requires. He notes that the federal government collects taxes from all citizens, which is constitutionally obligated to benefit all. Yet billions of them are used to support areas in which discrimination is an open and notorious practice. The fact is that while government sluggishly moves to achieve equal rights, it participates directly and indirectly in the denial of these rights.²

Fourthly, Jesus declared, The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me because He has anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives. And recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed" (Luke 4:18, NKJV). Psalm 82:3-4 states that we should "Defend the poor and fatherless: do justice to the afflicted and needy. Deliver the poor and needy: rid them out of the hand of the wicked." "If there be among you a poor man of one of thy brethren within any of thy gates in thy land which the Lord thy God giveth thee, thou shalt not harden thine heart, nor shut thine hand from thy poor brother: But thou shalt open thine hand wide unto him, and shalt surely lend him sufficient for his need, in that which he wanteth" (Deut. 15:7-8, NKJV).

In one of the devotionals on the Sankofa trip, Dominique Gilliard said that in Isaiah 58, we are literally called to be repairers of the breach. This is the missional work of the body of

² James M. Washinton, ed., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writing and Speeches* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1986), 153.

Christ. We are supposed to see the breaches that exist in society because of sin and be about the work of repair. He said we cannot do this if we are not honest with ourselves about what we feel when we see oppression and justice. He said we cannot avoid the pain. We have to enter into the pain because the cure of the pain is in the pain.

Martin Luther King Jr. also had something to say about injustice, equality, and belonging. On June 4, 1957, he made this statement at the University of California. He said that the struggle in the South is not so much the tension between white and negro people but somewhat between justice and injustice, between the forces of light and darkness. He called upon the audience to be maladjusted to segregation and discrimination. To be maladjusted as Amos, who amid the injustices of his day cried out in words that echoed across the generation, "let judgment run down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream. As maladjusted as Jefferson, who in the midst of an age amazingly adjusted to slavery cried out, "all men are created equal and endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights." As maladjusted as Jesus of Nazareth, who dreamed a dream of the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man.³ King believes that the essence of the Epistles of Paul is that Christians should rejoice at being deemed worthy to suffer for what they believe. In his opinion, the projection of a social gospel is the true witness of Christian life. This is the true meaning of the *ekklesia*—the inner, spiritual church.⁴

The Bible urges us to speak up for human beings who cannot defend themselves. To protect and care for the abused and to treat everyone fairly. God requires compassion against mistreatment and oppression. Note God's reaction to Miriam when she grumbled against

³ Ibid., 12-15.

⁴ Ibid., 345.

Moses' wife (Num. 12:1-13). And note what God did when Peter confronted him about the prejudicial actions (Acts 10:9-16, 11:1-18).

On the other hand, social justice is often made purely a Black and White issue in America today, but it is much more than that. We see God using the Babylonians to punish His people—the Nation of Israel (Jer. 52:1-11). He allowed them to be enslaved in Egypt for 300 years (Deut. 20:13-19). I also believe many things done in the name of social justice are not. Neither do they represent God's justice. Justice is impartial. We don't favor one over the other. We don't twist the truth or harbor hate and unforgiveness. Many occurrences today are reverse hate, which is not biblical, and God disapproves. I also believe that the issue of blacks fighting blacks is becoming chronic. And so, I hope that one day the movements will also address this. The "system" in the New Testament is similar to the one we have today. The main cause of this is sin. At the same time, we continue to strive for God's Kingdom to come on earth, but things will not be perfect until Christ returns.

Sociological Analysis of the Civil Rights Movement

The civil rights movement was a struggle for social justice and equality that occurred primarily in the 1950s and the 1960s. Until well into the 1960s, most of the leadership was drawn from black clergy. Most notable among them was Adam Clayton Powell Jr. during the war and post-war years and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr in the late 1950s and early 1960's. In an unprecedented manifestation of faith, courage, and perseverance, blacks, by the thousands, showed their determination to defy and unmask the oppressive laws and practices under which they lived through sit-ins, arrests, beatings, and even death in places such as Montgomery and Selma, and Alabama. They showed the world they were at least the moral equals of those who

had repeatedly accused them of being inferior. “We shall overcome.” Became both a cry of defiance and a confession of faith.⁵

A series of lawsuits and protests paved the way for a more extraordinary assault on racial bias. For example, during war-torn 1942, a strange protest occurred on the home front; CORE staged the first “sit-in” in a restaurant in the busy Loop area. In the interim, an early suit, *Mitchell v. United States*, occurred in 1941. In 1949-50 there was *Henderson v United States*. Finally, in 1948, the Supreme Court handed down the first of a series of decisions regarding school segregation. It was held in *Sipuel v. University of Oklahoma* that a state must offer schooling for Negroes “as soon as it provides it for the whites.” This and other decisions set the stage for the landmark ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954.⁶ Groups such as CORE, SNCC, and SCLC organized rallies, protests, and campaigns in cities known for discrimination.

Other Major Protests

According to James Washington in *A Testament of Hope*, on December 5, 1955, to the amused annoyance of the white citizens, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. called a citywide Negro boycott of the segregated bus system. To their surprise, it was almost one hundred percent successful. It lasted for 381 days and nearly bankrupted the bus line. What contributed to this was the late-night call that King received from E.D. Nixon, a Pullman porter identified with NAACP informing him that Rosa Parks was arrested because a bus driver demanded that she give up her seat, and she refused because her feet hurt. Nixon told him, “It’s time this stops; we

⁵ Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity, vol. 2, The Reformation to the Present Day* (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 2014), 485.

⁶ Charles H. Wesley, *International Library of Afro-American Life and History: The Quest for Equality from Civil War to Civil Rights* (Cornwells Heights, Pennsylvania : The Publishers Agency, 1976), 243-245.

ought to boycott the buses.” King agreed. The next night they had a meeting with the Negro community leaders. On Saturday and Sunday, they appealed to the Negro Community with leaflets and from the pulpit to boycott the buses on Monday. King’s home was bombed during the siege pushing thousands of enraged Negroes to start a riot. The soft-spoken Dr. King, however, prevailed on them to channel their anger into nonviolent protest. Within a year, the Supreme Court had ruled Jim Crow seating unlawful on Montgomery’s buses, and King found himself at twenty-seven, on the front lines of a nonviolent Negro revolution against racial injustice.

King moved to Atlanta, where he formed the Southern Christian Leadership Conference of church-affiliated civil rights organizations, which joined activist groups like CORE and SNCC in a widening campaign of sit-in demonstrations and freedom rides throughout the South. However, in King’s eyes, the movement was moving too slowly for him. Hence, he created a crisis in 1963 that would “dramatize the Negro plight and galvanize the national conscience.” As a result, over three thousand three hundred Negroes, including King, were arrested. Many were outraged by front-page pictures of Negro demonstrators being brutalized by police chief Bull Connor’s billy sticks, police dogs, and fire hoses.

Mass sit-ins and demonstrations erupted in eight hundred southern cities in the following months. On the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, King eloquently addressed President Kennedy’s proposed civil rights bill to enforce voting rights, equal employment opportunities, desegregating public facilities, and the now famous march on Washington, two hundred thousand strong. By the end of that summer, America’s Negroes had won more tangible gains

than any other year since 1865. Martin Luther had become their acknowledged leader and most respected spokesman.⁷

King states that the image of Birmingham helped bring the Civil Rights Bill into being in 1963. Because previously, President Kennedy had decided not to propose it that year because he felt that it would arouse the South and it would meet a bottleneck. But Birmingham and subsequent developments caused him to reorder his legislative priorities. One of these developments was the campaign in St. Augustine, Florida. Dr. Robert Hayling, St. Augustine's movement leader, requested help because his home was shot up with buckshot twice, three Negro homes had been bombed, and many Negro nightclubs shotgunned. Klansmen abducted four Negroes, and beat them unconscious with clubs, brass knuckles, ax handles, pistol butts, and many more occurrences. So, SCLC joined their four hundredth-year celebrations as America's oldest city—by converting it into a nonviolent battleground. Not long after that, the Civil Rights Bill was passed—outlining many of the injustices they campaigned against.⁸

The Civil Rights movement has attained some significant achievements, such as the legal segregation used to control race was dismantled, and Blacks were no longer humiliated under Jim Crow Laws. Everyone can now access restaurants, transportation, and other public institutions. Blacks now have the right to vote. But, sadly, some of what these leaders fought for is still happening today—the unjustified murder of our black people, for example, Ahmaud Arbery, Michael Brown, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and Trayvon Martin, by police officers. There are more Blacks than whites imprisoned today. Black parents must have what they call “the talk” with their children. Recently in Kansas City, an 84 years old White man shot a black

⁷ Washinton, ed., *A Testament of Hope*, 340-343.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 351-352.

teenager who accidentally rang his doorbell. We see where some jobs are offered to Whites only. And if you get into some companies, it doesn't matter how qualified you are; you will remain at the lowest rung of the ladder because you are Black.

Application

My takeaways are surrounding leadership development and the church. From the Sankofa Trip, I see and hear firsthand the abuse, oppression, and struggle that our black people experienced, and I also see perseverance in our ancestors and our people now. My primary takeaway is that people are at different stages of their lives. Just for being Black, people sometimes go through a lot. Not only that, but many of us are still on the lowest rung of the ladder. So, life can be a mountain. However, with God, we can climb it. Our history is valuable and profound, so I hope to pass on this information to others so they can know, understand and help when possible. I also hope to defend or stand up for the oppressed and disenfranchised when possible.

The book, *Subversive Witness*, reminded me to be present and actively involved in the community to be an effective leader. Gilliard provides us with the example of Bryan Stevenson and his wife, who showed what it meant to be present and active. One of the things Bryan Stevenson does is teach in a maximum-security prison. This program is the only one in Illinois that offers incarcerated individuals an opportunity to earn a master's degree. He and his wife also use one unit of their house for transitional housing for returning citizens. Additionally, they are focusing on a business that will employ returning citizens.⁹

⁹ Dominique Dubois Gilliard, *Subversive Witness. Scripture's Call to Leverage Privilege* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2021), 94-95.

Secondly, leadership development involves challenges and hurdles and entering into unpopular areas. It requires one to be faithful to what they know is right despite the risk/cost. I like where Gilliard quoted Stevenson saying that many of us have been taught that if there's a bad part of town, you don't put your business there. But he suggests that we do the opposite. We need to engage and invest and position ourselves in the places where there is despair.¹⁰ He tells us how Jonathan Brooks (Pastah J) was able to bring a reasonably priced Whole Foods Market into Englewood, one of the most stigmatized neighborhoods on the south side of Chicago. Englewood was previously a food desert.¹¹

Thirdly, it requires us to lead by example, stand up, and look out for our people. To speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all destitute. To speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy (Proverbs 31:8-9[New International Version]). Kaitlin Perez, a friend of Dominique, intentionally sought ways to use her resources and social capital to look out for others. She also stood up for them by securing legal representation and posting a bond for someone using her social network and financial resources. She also raised funds for three black businesses to stay alive during COVID-19. Kaitlin also had her travel cost to a funeral unexpectedly covered by her family. She then used the money she had to pay for this expense to help neighbors and friends.¹²

From the book, *The Color of Compromise*, I learned that developing or becoming an effective leader requires perseverance. This was portrayed in William J. Seymour, who contracted chicken pox, resulting in blindness in one eye. He was segregated from the whites in school and rejected by a church in Los Angeles. However, this did not stop him from receiving

¹⁰ Ibid., 115-116.

¹¹ Ibid., 79-80.

¹² Ibid., 144-147.

what he believed were divine visions from God.¹³ His theology was faulty. But his determination is something I think all current and prospective church leaders should emulate. Also, to be an effective leader in the church, if you don't get anything else right, your theology should be sound. In that way, you will not tamper with what God is communicating to you and the world. It will also determine how one thinks and what one does. Not only that, but we'll be able to discern the truth from deception.

In my future ministry, I could mirror the examples provided. So, like Bryan Stevenson, I can make myself present in my community by identifying where there is a need for prison ministry, making the required arrangement with the prison chaplain, and organizing a team to get involved. Also, I could research the most underserved community closest to me. Find out what is needed and fill that need. Additionally, I could adopt Kaitlin's approach and use any expected/unexpected excess funds to assist others by intentionally persevering even when things seem hopeless.

The book *This Here Flesh* reminds me that every leader or developing leader needs to rest. Riley writes, "God, in Christ, learned something of this incessant demand. In one of the gospels, Jesus wakes up at daybreak just to go out to find a place to exhale alone for a bit."¹⁴ Rest is not only healthy, but it increases your ability to function effectively. The other takeaway is to be alert to those in need, even unexpectedly. Riley wrote about her grandmother, who had no money and nowhere to go. She and her children slept in her car. Her last resort was to pull into a church parking lot for a night. Shortly afterward, the pastor greeted her and gave her

¹³ Jemar Tisby, *The Color of Compromise. The Truth about the American Church's Complicity in Racism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2019), 113-114.

¹⁴ Cole Arthur Riley, *This Here Flesh. Spirituality, Liberation, and the Stories That Make Us* (New York, NY: Convergent Books, 2022), 153.

twenty dollars, some food, and somewhere to sleep. It wasn't the best place, but his benevolent gesture was noted.¹⁵ Another takeaway is that as a leader, it is good to learn people's stories and have some level of humor to put people at ease during challenging times.¹⁶

I can implement these in my current and future ministry by setting aside at least one day per week to isolate, reflect, and get some needed rest. I can also be intentional and discerning about entertaining strangers. Not only that, I could work on learning people's stories and endeavor to bring cheerfulness to a challenging situation without diminishing the pain of the persons involved. Finally, and most importantly, I want to be even more intentional about studying God's word to ensure my theology is sound, understand what God is communicating, and pass on the correct information. I also hope to start a small business to help community members obtain jobs, especially those just leaving College.

¹⁵ Ibid., 151-152.

¹⁶ Ibid., 162-163.

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