

IN OUR RESPONSE TO POVERTY, WHAT IS THE CONNECTION BETWEEN JUSTICE AND CHARITY?

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1 Introduction

In the world today there remain extremes of wealth and poverty, while the need to care for the poor is central to God's message in the Bible. In this essay, we seek to consider the nature of this message to Christians¹ and the associated connection between justice and charity. As a basic methodology in addressing such moral issues, one may first seek definitions before consulting biblical teaching and seeking to apply it to current realities, taking into account insights of modern social sciences, then act appropriately. The essay is structured accordingly.

2 Definitions – dictionary and biblical

Poverty is popularly defined² as 'the condition of being without adequate food or money'. Meanwhile, justice is linked to 'the moral principle that determines the fairness of actions', related albeit not limited to 'administration of law' and conformity to it. The latter covers more 'retributive' justice when the issue for the poor is 'distributive' and 'restorative' justice. Charity is commonly seen today as 'the giving of money, help, food etc. to those in need'. Note that justice confers rights and obligations, while charity is a matter of choice and love for the other person.

Looking at biblical definitions, in the Old Testament *ani* relates to someone who is 'weak, miserable, helpless and suffering', socially or materially poor, dependent. In the New Testament *ptochos* means 'so poor that one cannot live on one's own possessions', needing help from others.³ Sider suggests that what these definitions⁴ have in common is low

¹ Note that we do not address the extensive Catholic social teaching, most recently exemplified by Pope Benedict's first encyclical *God is Love* (25th January 2006).

² Definitions in this paragraph are from ed. Hanks, *Collins English Dictionary*.

³ Kvalbein, 'Poor/Poverty', 687.

economic status due to calamity or oppression.⁵⁶ Meanwhile justice in Hebrew is both *zedek* - a right relationship with God and *mishpat*, the outworking of the relation with humankind. *Zedek* is crucial to *mishpat* so one lacking a relation with God is unlikely to act justly in the world. Meanwhile, 1 Corinthians 13:3 shows that the giving of funds per se does not constitute biblical charity (*agape*); which relates rather to our heart-attitude to others in doing so.

3 Biblical connections – Old Testament

In the Old Testament, poverty is contrary to the will of God; the poor are fellow humans he created in his image (Genesis 1:27). On the other hand the poor can be lazy as well as unfortunate (Prov 6:9-11) and God has no general preference for the poor, as a righteous person is normally prosperous (Prov 15:6). God nevertheless shows a special concern for the poor, as in Exodus and the freeing of the unjustly-oppressed. A key aim of the Mosaic law is then to prevent such oppression happening again, so the Israelites shall have no poor among them (Deut 15:4).

Immediately the focus is on justice. Accordingly, in the settlement of Canaan, all were given an equal distribution of land (Joshua 18), giving equal opportunity by work to enjoy the fruits of God's creation. This was supported by provision of the Jubilee (Leviticus 25) – entailing return of land to the family that originally owned it. The Sabbath year (Deuteronomy 15)

⁴ Note that there are wider meanings of poor in the Bible, albeit less relevant to this essay – in the Old Testament it can mean 'under persecution, ill, guilty' and the positive characteristic 'humble'. In the New, it includes someone who inherits the kingdom.

⁵ Sider, *Rich*, 41.

⁶ Throughout the Bible, other persons understood to be poor include widows, orphans, strangers, the crippled, the blind and the lame (i.e. they lack adequate food, clothing and housing).

entailed release of debts, freedom of Hebrew slaves⁷, and land left fallow so the poor could eat. Numerous additional legal protections for the poor include leaving the corner of a field at harvest⁸ and no taking of a millstone.

In these provisions God overrides human justice - unlimited property rights - with his own higher justice, since he is the owner of all things (Ecclesiastes 11:5). He creates a mechanism of ‘structural justice’ to offset the fallen tendency of humankind to exploit others’ misfortunes. To ensure this, it was also essential that legal justice in court cases be done to the poor (Exodus 23:6).

There remains a role for charity, as stressed in Hosea 12:6 ‘maintain *love* and justice’.

Experience of God’s blessing should lead to generosity and care for the poor (Deuteronomy 15:7-11). God identifies with the poor when they receive charity (Proverbs 19:17). It can be suggested that in the Old Testament, charity was a way of providing for those who temporarily became poor, before the provisions of justice correct the situation, as well as a way for the rich to show gratitude to God and recognise the humanity of the poor.

The importance of these aspects of justice and charity can also be seen by the justification of the destruction of Israel (Amos 6:4-7), and the exile of Judah (Isaiah 1:21-26) by inhumanity to the poor. Besides individual injustices (1 Kings 21), God focuses on what Sider calls ‘structural evil’⁹ – a corrupt legal system, and unjust decrees favouring the rich (Isaiah 10:1-4), leading to concentration of land holdings (Isaiah 5:8). Some of those punished, such as the ‘cows of Bashan’ (Amos 4:1-2) would be barely aware of the evil system they benefited from

⁷ Eichrodt, ‘Question’, 271 argues that in overriding property rights, the rights given here to slaves shows that the value of a single human is greater than all material goods.

⁸ Note that this is not a handout but an opportunity to survive by hard work (Hughes, *God*, 157), as was the case for Ruth.

⁹ Sider, *Rich*, 112.

but would be punished nonetheless. Nevertheless, punishment was also for lack of charity, (Isaiah 58:5-10). These can all be seen as a warning for us today of God's passionate¹⁰ wrath at mistreatment of the poor.

We conclude that in the Old Testament justice is key for the poor. God's laws enjoin distributive and restorative justice, while Israel's failure to follow them - and to show charity - led to God's retribution, but a continuing plight of the poor. Meanwhile, a just allocation of land is prophesied to be restored by God himself in the latter days (Micah 4:4). The coming of Jesus can be seen as setting that process in motion.

4 Biblical connections – New Testament

In considering the connection of justice and charity in the New Testament, two issues are whether the Old Testament laws (and hence the analysis above) cease to apply, and also whether Jesus' ministry and the coming of the Holy Spirit change the role of charity. Note first however that Jesus was poor with 'nowhere to lay his head' (Matt 8:20). His ministry was to be good news to the poor (Luke 4:18) as they were shown their equal value in the kingdom. Luke's version of the Sermon on the Mount focuses on those poor now and their oppression by the rich (Luke 6:20-26).

One could argue that Jesus' concern for justice was taken as given since he accepted the whole law (Matt 5:17-20). His warning about the rich man and Lazarus was based on Moses and the prophets. Calvin¹¹ argues that whereas the ceremonial law is no longer applicable for Christians, the moral law (i.e. the 10 commandments) is universally valid and the civil law

¹⁰ Stott, *Issues*, 232, highlights that we too need passion as well as biblical analysis and rational detachment in addressing poverty.

¹¹ Cited in Hughes, *God*, 46.

(i.e. the regulations of the land of Israel such as the Jubilee) need interpreting for today in the light of the moral law and not discarding. Wright highlights the particular relevance of the Law in showing the society (Israel) that God saw as an example or ‘paradigm’ for all of humankind¹² – a role which with Jesus’ advent is taken by the church.

Does the New Testament encourage Christians to oppose ‘structural injustice’ in politics and economics? Sider argues it does, with structural injustice reflected in the influence of the devil on ‘the world’¹³ (Eph 2:1-2); Taylor sees the G8 and IMF as ‘principalities and powers’.

¹⁴ On the other hand Blomberg, citing inter alia James 5:10, argues the New Testament does not directly encourage ‘structural change to remedy structural evil’.¹⁵ In my view Sider is closer to the mark.

Jesus’ summary of the law - to love God and love your neighbour as yourself - puts charity as central for believers. Jesus makes the negative provisions of the law not to act (justice) into positive injunctions to help (charity).¹⁶ The neighbour is defined very widely to be any suffering person, as shown by the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:33). Jesus’ message is that believers need to adopt his carefree approach to possessions, thus charitably aiding the poor, trusting in God and loving fellow humans. And the early church of Acts 2 indeed featured sharing of resources. This was a fulfilment of the Deuteronomic prophecy that there would be no poor. In the early church, it can be argued that charity gave rise to justice without the need for legal sanction, owing to transformation of relationships.

¹² Wright, ‘Ethical’, 203-31.

¹³ Sider, *Rich*, 117.

¹⁴ Taylor, *Poverty*, 49.

¹⁵ Blomberg, *Neither*, 247.

¹⁶ Hughes, *God*, 61.

Paul's collection for the Jerusalem church (Rom 15:26-27) highlights charity prompted by social need, also showing love and solidarity between churches. Paul's guidelines for sharing in 2 Corinthians 8 show an appropriate link of charity to justice.¹⁷ The first and second are based on charity – 'give all you can' and 'giving is voluntary', but the third stresses justice as an outcome - as in the distribution of manna in Exodus, there should be a form of equality so all have their basic needs met.

Jesus highlights that if wealth becomes our idol, we cannot either love God or our neighbour (Matt 6:24). Hence, besides concern for the poor his teaching addresses salvation for the rich (Mark 10:21) via charity to the poor. Jesus stresses the future punishment of those (such as the rich man with Lazarus, Luke 16:19-31) turning a blind eye to suffering, even if they are not the cause of it. God's retributive justice is a further motivation to help the poor.

Our conclusion is that justice is basic to the overall biblical message – being essential for 'able' people to have productive resources to earn a decent living, and those 'disabled' to get a generous share of resources.¹⁸ We need individual justice and also justice in the structure of economic relations. As God owns all things, we must act as stewards of our possessions in respect of charity – which should itself give rise to justice.¹⁹ Indeed, without charity, it can be argued that God's justice will often not be applied, as increasingly in Old Testament Israel, and even in the early church (James 2:14-17). Transformed hearts full of charity are needed for justice to be achieved, absent direct divine intervention as in the Exodus.

¹⁷ Sider, *Rich* 86.

¹⁸ Sider, *Rich*, 89.

¹⁹ Sugden, 'Poor/Poverty', 523 notes that in this way God wants to influence 'the (economic) relationships between people that poverty and wealth express' and not just the distribution of material possessions themselves.

5 Connections in the modern anti poverty debate

Whereas the Bible commends justice and charity, specific aspects need to be reinterpreted in a globalised, technological society. Any application of biblical principles to poverty needs to take into account ‘wisdom’ from social science, while bearing in mind they are fallen and describe fallen human nature.²⁰ For example, economic analyses can give a technical explanation how poverty arises and persists (lack of means of production)²¹ in line with the Old Testament. Understanding of economic arguments is helpful in participating in development debates, for example net benefits of free trade. On the other hand economics sees self-interest as the main driver of human economic activity – there is virtually no role for charity while the case for justice has to be based on self-interest (albeit possibly benefiting the poor in a utilitarian manner). Economists tend to technocracy, imposing solutions on countries and people - contrary to love of the poor as autonomous human beings.

A cynical approach to politics suggests that politicians are focused on re-election, and need to be convinced by voter pressure that those who don't vote deserve assistance. But one could note also that moral arguments can win over politicians ahead of the electorate (e.g. the death penalty) and underlying political theories argue for justice e.g. Rawls' theory of justice²², as do constitutions.

²⁰ Indeed, Taylor, *Poverty*, 72 argues that failure of Christian social policy in addressing poverty has linked to unwillingness to come to terms with such alternative accounts of reality.

²¹ Sachs, *End*, 51-73.

²² That is, that economic and social arrangements should be those that would be agreed to by someone ignorant of where in (global) society they would be born.

Psychology highlights that poor people dislike the idea of dependence and wish to be self-sufficient. Also there can be ‘compassion fatigue’ among charity donors. Sociology highlights the role of social structures where resources are unequally divided in generating poverty.²³

In using the social sciences we can distinguish individual acts towards the poor by Christians from collective acts. In the former we can apply the above biblical analysis focused on charity to generate justice, and can be ‘salt and light’ to others. Social sciences show us constraints and means to overcome them (development strategies, appropriate assistance). For collective pressure we may need coalitions with those having differing motivations as highlighted by the social sciences, to convince non-Christian politicians. In this case we can count less on charity and more on justice.

Concluding with a few applied examples, there is the issue of charitable contributions for famine or disaster relief. Here the individual is called on, like Paul’s contemporaries, to give much and voluntarily for immediate need. Governments, given their motivations, may be too slow moving to fulfil this objective – and may have mixed ‘foreign policy’ objectives. But as psychology highlights there is a negative side to charity where individuals are not free to choose their own course of action²⁴, highlighting the need rather for empowerment under justice in non-emergency cases.

In the ‘Make Poverty History’ debate economists argue we need to create just structures in global society so all have enough productive resources.²⁵ Justice is allowing equality of opportunity, which in the modern globalised world can lead to self sustaining growth of the

²³ Stott, *Issues*, 240.

²⁴ ‘Short term aid may be appreciated in cases of desperate need, long term reliance on handouts reduces self esteem and motivation’ (Sider, *Rich*, 262).

²⁵ Sachs, *End*, 266-287.

economy - which will itself reduce population growth. In this context, the poor need free healthcare and education as well as sufficient capital (e.g. via micro loans). Land reform is likely to be needed given the inequality in its distribution. Reform is also needed of unjust economic structures such as unfair trade blocking exports of poor countries to rich ones.

Such analyses require pressure on governments and the rich to give charitably to ensure ‘structural justice’, with coalitions appealing to non-Christians (national security, economic benefit as countries develop). But can we rely on fallen rich-country governments to deliver aid and poor-country ones to administer it properly?²⁶ Individual Christian action based on charity helpfully complements such ‘macro’ schemes, e.g. micro lending, fair trade purchasing, service in poor countries. Furthermore, we need to press that such ‘solutions’ involve the poor themselves and are not just imposed, to the detriment of their dignity and commitment.

Finally, authors such as Sider argue the Western lifestyle is causing global warming, and hence needs to be scaled down, also releasing money and time to be given to the poor.²⁷ This act of charity is both for the poor and for our own salvation as the guilty rich; here we are the ‘cows of Bashan’, unaware of the structural injustice we are generating as climate change will affect the poor much more than the rich.

5 Conclusion

We have emphasised that in addressing the needs of the poor, justice is the key. Charity in the world’s terms is needed for emergency relief but the poor need ‘a hand up and not

²⁶ Similar issues regarding the gap between government promises and performance arise regarding the application of Leviticus 26 to the concept of Jubilee 2000 and debt relief for the poorest countries.

²⁷ Sider, *Rich*, 249-257.

handouts'.²⁸ On the other hand, in a fallen world, justice may not come about readily – as witness the degeneration of Israel. Christians are urged to be charitable from the heart. This requires action - not only being generous with money but also being an example of generosity to others and – along with non-Christians - fighting structural injustice that keeps the poor poor. Christians need to be 'wise as serpents' in not disregarding the world's wisdom in social sciences while accepting its imperfection and fallenness. They need a passionate prophetic voice against injustices, prayer and evangelism to bring others' hearts in line with Jesus. And they need to love the poor as fellow humans, not technocratic problems. For the poor need justice, but only charity will ensure it.

WORD COUNT: 2494 WORDS

²⁸ Hughes, *God*, 54.

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