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Who Is My Neighbor?

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Introduction

This article is presented in the form of multiple questions that we hope will focus conversations on the relationship between servant leadership and social justice. Do the commonalities of empathy, altruism, and justice bind servant leadership and social justice together? Leaders seeking to follow Jesus Christ are encouraged to take notice of His servant leadership orientation and zeal for social justice. What is a Christian to do about social injustices?

What Is Social Justice?

Social justice is a value or belief that all people should have equal access to resources and basic human rights. Inequalities should be minimized so marginalized people are not harmed due to their lack of power. Social justice promotes wellness and eliminates oppressive social conditions (Torres-Harding, Siers, & Olson, 2011).

Social justice in action takes many forms. It can involve changing "institutions, policies, and economic or governmental structures that perpetuate harmful or unfair practices . . ." (Torres-Harding, Siers, & Olson, 2011, p. 2). This involvement takes the shape of advocating, analysis of public policy, community organizing, and at times political activism. It also involves collaborating with the community to work together to resolve social injustices. Furthermore, social justice involves informing and equipping people with both the knowledge that oppression exists in clearly stated forms, and information showing how people can take action to reverse injustices. Thus social justice begins with information and ends in transformative action via interventions and skill development (Fouad, Gerstein, & Toporek, 2006; Prilleltensky & Nelson, 2002).

In addition to this transformative action, systematic changes take place in organizational, cultural, and political systems of this world.

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After people express empathy with a social injustice, they, hopefully, will take action. This action leads to more permanent changes that forever alter the way a system works (Sarason, 1981). This might take the form of a change in organizational practice, or in the confrontation of those in power (Prilleltensky & Nelson, 2002).

A tangible example exists in the cocoa industry. Recent developments have shown that children as young as eight years old are being forcibly taken from their homes to work on plantations in the Ivory Coast. This is a social injustice. The right to express wishes and envision a future is removed (Lloyd, 2012; Prilleltensky & Nelson, 2002). Furthermore, basic human rights are violated and in need of protection (Torres-Harding, Siers, & Olson, 2011).

Organizations such as Not For Sale, Inc., mobilized an advocacy campaign aimed at equipping consumers with the knowledge of human trafficking and oppression as it relates to the cocoa industry. This mobilization took the shape of changing "institutions, policies, and economic or governmental structures that perpetuate harmful or unfair practices . . ." (Torres-Harding, Siers, & Olson, 2011, p. 2) via the construction of the California Transparency in Supply Chains Act of 2011.

While the law is far from robust, it is a meaningful first step toward forcing corporations to look closely at where their ingredients come from in the context of how the products were sourced (Todres, 2012). It is assumed that there are still children working against their will in the Ivory Coast; however, transformative action has been taken and it is hoped that a combination of socially concerned corporations, coupled with changing consumer demand, will bring strict enforcement to child labor laws in places around the globe. This transformative change may forever alter how American consumers buy chocolate, how American corporations make chocolate, and how African plantations harvest chocolate (Pennington, 2011; Sarason, 1981). This example demonstrates how social justice can be restored.

Are Christians Indifferent Towards Social Injustices?

Stearns (2010), the president of a Christian relief organization, illustrates the indifference of the American evangelical church with a comparison of monetary expenditures on the use of time, talent, and treasure to work towards bringing social justice versus annual spending habits in areas such as entertainment, recreation, and personal care. As an example, Stearns estimated that 25,000 children die of hunger and/or

preventable diseases every day in this world. This would be equivalent to 60 jumbo jets full of children crashing—every day of the year. In addition, three billion people live on less than two dollars per day, and 200 million are nearing death by starvation each day. Extreme poverty causes people in certain areas of the world to devote as much as 18 hours per week to water acquisition, a task often delegated to children due to its simplicity. Children employed in gathering water supplies are thus unable to attend schools and be educated, further exacerbating a problem for many generations in the most impoverished nations. To further complicate matters, this water is often contaminated with various preventable diseases.

Stearns (2010) further discusses these facts in light of consumption habits of American Christians: Americans annually spend over $700 billion on entertainment, $13 billion on cosmetic surgery, $65 billion on jewelry, $31 billion on pet care, and $58 billion on lottery tickets. Furthermore, American children spend $179 billion per year on toys, candy, and other items as an extension of their parent's expendable income. In contrast, while Christians do give $5 billion to overseas missions largely focused on alleviating poverty, they give less than 3% of their income to their churches. In discussing giving habits, Platt (2010) notes that 98% of that giving stays within the four walls of American churches to fuel land, labor, and capital to serve internal customers with programs run by professional practitioners of the faith.

Stearns (2010) calls for a consideration of the costs of fixing these problems. A mere $10 billion would solve the world's unclean/contaminated water problem. Roughly $65 billion would solve the world's most extreme poverty cases. Universal primary education for all children who do not currently have it would cost a mere $6 billion. Most startling of all is that it would only cost $13 billion to provide basic health and nutrition to every impoverished person in the world. Stearns challenges American Christians to weigh the approximately $1 trillion spent on entertainment, cosmetic surgery, jewelry, pet care, and lottery tickets against the comparatively tiny $100 billion costs of addressing some of the world's most serious social problems. His thesis is that though American evangelical Christians have within their grasp the financial resources to address these problems, until they are made aware of them, they will continue to live in indifference to the problems.

In calling American Christians back to the foundations of their faith, Stearns (2010) presents a compelling overview of biblical texts concerning social justice. According to Stearns, the biblical evidence calling followers of God to justice is overwhelming:

> These expectations are not mysterious or difficult to discern. They are, in fact, etched clearly in page after page of Scripture—a bright thread of God's compassion for people and His zeal for justice: "He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8). (p. 53)

Did Jesus Take Action Against Social Injustices?

As described in the New Testament, Jesus Christ advocated and modeled a life of bringing restorative justice to those He encountered. In His first public comments recorded about His mission, He stated: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:18-19, NIV).

Then, in some of His final words to His followers before the crucifixion, Jesus discusses how their lives should reflect a concern for others:

> "For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me."
>
> Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?"
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> The King will reply, "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me." (Matt. 25:35-40, NIV)

Jesus rebukes the person who does not care for the hungry, the thirsty, the poor, the imprisoned. He equates serving those deemed "the least of these" (Matt. 25:40) as equal to serving an all-powerful God.

Thus at the beginning and the end of Jesus' ministry, He advocates for bringing justice to the poor, the marginalized, the imprisoned. Throughout His life, Jesus shows compassion and justice, and admonishes His followers to "do likewise" (John 20:21; Luke 10:37). Furthermore, He says a lack of action can lead to personal ruin:

> But the one who hears my words and does not put them into practice is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation. The moment the torrent struck that house, it collapsed and its destruction was complete. (Luke 6:49, NIV)

Following Jesus' crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension into heaven, the early church responds to the teachings, exhortations, and values of Jesus by sharing their wealth, ensuring that there are no poor among them, and actively caring for orphans and widows. Notice this account in the book of Acts:

> All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need. Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means "son of encouragement"), sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet." (Acts 4:32-37, NIV)

Cooper (2005) discusses the presumed leadership orientation of followers of Jesus Christ: servanthood, a concept found in the New Testament record of the teachings of Jesus Christ Himself. Jesus says, "Whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served" (Matt. 20:26-28).

Are Servant Leadership and Social Justice Connected?

The core of servant leadership involves serving others and ensuring that they grow as a result. Greenleaf's (1977) overarching question in being a servant leader involves the effect of servant leadership on marginalized persons. Two key questions emerge, the first being whether or not followers become "healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants" (p. 27). The second question is of "the effect on the least privileged in society. . . . Will they benefit or at least not be further deprived?" (p. 27).

This notion of building health and autonomy closely links with Prilleteltenski and Nelson (2002) and Lloyd's (2012) discussion of social justice; that is, the ability to express wishes, cast vision and dream an independent and autonomous future. Furthermore, social justice from the perspective of Christian faith practice involves the right to personal autonomy (Brueggemann, 2012; Chan 2009; Platt, 2010; Stearns, 2009; Wytsma, 2012). Similarly, Torres-Harding, Siers, and Olson (2011) state that social justice involves "participation, collaboration, and empowerment (which) are all key components of social justice work" (p. 2). Echoing this, Toporek and Williams (2006) discuss social justice as actions people take to empower and restore people. This notion of "empowerment" is strongly related to autonomy in social justice literature as discussed by Klecker and Loadman (1996) and Short and Rinehart (1992).

Secondly, Greenleaf's (1977) concern over the effect of servant leadership on "the least privileged in society" (p. 27) aligns with social justice

concerns of ensuring that the marginalized members of society have access to power, resources, and fair treatment under the law to protect their human rights (Brueggemann, 2012; Chan 2009; Platt, 2010; Prilleteltenski & Nelson, 2002; Stearns, 2009; Torres-Harding, Siers, & Olson, 2011; Wytsma, 2012).

This notion of justice manifests in servant leadership as altruism. Altruism is discussed in the literature (e.g., Cialdini, Brown, Lewis, Luce, & Neuberg, 1987; Mastain, 2006; Oliner & Oliner, 1988; Oliner, Oliner, Baron, Blum, Krebs, & Smolenska, 1992; Snyder & Lopez, 2007), and in servant leadership theory as one of the core attributes of a servant leader (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006; Greenleaf, 1977; Spears, 1998). Beck (2010) found that altruism manifested as "an others orientation, a desire to make a positive difference in the lives of others, and leading to help others" (p. 97). Leaders who display an altruistic mindset for personal or organizational benefit tend to align more with the transformational leadership orientation. The servant leader, however, primarily wants to make a difference in an individual's life (Bass, 2000; Beck, 2010).

Furthermore, Barbuto & Wheeler (2006) discuss servant leadership in terms of emotional healing, which involves empathy, listening, and the ability to solve problems relationally. The two concepts of altruism and emotional healing overlap with social justice concepts of empathy, understanding, and social responsibility. Altruism emerges from a foundation of empathy which then promotes social and economic justice (Segal, 2011).

Other overlapping elements from social justice and servant leadership include low power distance orientation found in many servant leadership environments. Power distance is defined as "the extent to which a community accepts and endorses authority, power differences, and status privileges orientation" (Carl, Gupta, & Javidan, 2004, p. 513). Low power distance places all people on a more equal playing field and formally refers to closing the gap on those with power and those without. Cultures with low power distance are expected to encourage servant leadership, as followers and leaders are placed on equal planes (Davis, Schoorman, & Donaldson, 1997).

Along these lines, social justice is rooted in the notion that the marginalized members of society should have equal access to power, resources, and privileges. At its core it argues for a culture of low power distance. In fact, people interested in bringing social justice to marginalized peoples of society were found to be positively linked to low power distance orientation (Blader & Chen, 2011).

Christian leaders are encouraged to prayerfully consider how the

seemingly blended concepts of servant leadership and social justice can inform their leadership endeavors. Following are a few thought provoking questions to help start a dialogue in your environment:

1. Can I be a servant leader who does not have a heart for social justice?
2. Can I practice social justice without a servant leader orientation?
3. How can my servant leadership provoke followers to helping "the least?"
4. Raising awareness is not enough; the end goal of social justice is to change behaviors, something that does not happen automatically after simple raising of awareness. How can your organization move beyond simple awareness to taking some action? What stops you from taking action?
5. Servant leaders possess several characteristics, organizational stewardship being one of them. Barbuto and Wheeler (2006) define this characteristic as involving "an ethic or value for taking responsibility for the well-being of the community and making sure that the strategies and decisions undertaken reflect the commitment to give back and leave things better than found" (p. 319). How does this characteristic intuitively relate with the concept of social justice? Are organizational stewards needed in organizations today? Why or why not? What forces are at work that affect the development of organizational stewards? How can one train leaders to be organizational stewards?
6. What solutions can your organization offer to relieve social and economic injustice? What are some steps you personally can take to begin to help your organization be a part of solving some of the world's worst problems?
7. Think seriously about the Great Commission for a moment: It truly is "Great," as in "Massive." However, given that Jesus is alive, orchestrating the worldwide response to His Gospel (Heb. 1), and that we are called to go into all the nations, making disciples of all nations while obeying all of the commandments of Jesus (Matt. 28), what stops us from using our positions as leaders to catalyze social and economic justice to the ends of the earth?
8. It might be easy to think that secular development organizations should be responsible for injustices such as lack of access to water and education. Why would Matthew Parris (2009), a confirmed atheist, make the following statement? "I've become convinced of the enormous contribution that Christian evangelism makes in Africa: sharply distinct from the work of secular NGOs, government projects and international aid efforts. These alone will not do. Education and training alone will not do." Read "Matthew Parris: As an Atheist, I

Truly Believe Africa Needs God" (http://comeandseeafrica.org/atheist/athiestafrica.htm) and dialogue about what it is that Christianity contributes in Africa. Is the situation similar in other places?

9. If you are interested in what other Christian organizations are doing about social justice issues, Google "fair trade and churches." Why do you think your denomination is actively involved (or not) in this social issue?

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