

New Covenant Theology and Social Justice

The foundational question: *Does the Law of Christ have a transformative agenda for society?*

In other words, are Christians obligated by the law of Christ to do things like feed and clothe the *unbelieving* poor, homeless, and sick?

On February 1st, 1960, four teenage black men that were freshmen at a local university decided to hold a “sit-in” at the segregated food counter at Woolworth’s in downtown Greensboro, NC. This put Greensboro on the map concerning the civil rights movement of the 1960s, and ever since then, Greensboro has had a steady influx of politically liberal influence that emphasizes the importance of civil and social justice issues. As a result, many theologically liberal churches in our city are involved in feeding and clothing the homeless, indigent, and poor, whereas except for our church, few evangelical churches are involved in doing the same. Most evangelical churches are involved in supporting the Greensboro Crisis Pregnancy Care center and essentially do not have much involvement with the poor and indigent other than on a case-by-case basis. Before I get into the meat of this topic, please let me give this disclaimer:

If you are ministering to unbelievers primarily through providing food, shelter, clothing, and crisis pregnancy situations working in a soup kitchen, I am not saying that you are sin by doing these things. On the contrary, I commend anyone who desires to preach the gospel to unbelievers and minister to them in a way that addresses their most basic physical needs of food, clothing, and shelter.

However, when it comes to doing those things, I believe many Christians could do it more biblically and that is what this paper is about.

Defining our Terms

Defining terms is important when it comes to any theological controversy, the problem is that when it comes to defining “social justice” there isn’t any real concrete, uniform, definition that exists. A Google search conducted on 7-23-2011 revealed the following varied web definitions:

Social justice generally refers to the idea of creating an egalitarian society or institution that is based on the principles of equality and solidarity, that understands and values human rights, and that recognizes the dignity of every human being.¹

Equitable access to resources and the benefits derived from them; a system that recognizes inalienable rights and adheres to what is fair, honest, and moral.²

Includes a vision of society in which the distribution of resources is equitable and all members are physically and psychologically safe and secure.³

¹ en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_justice

² http://higherred.mcgraw-hill.com/sites/0072452706/student_view0/glossary.html

The concept that all people should have equal access to services and goods produced in a community. It includes ideas of environmental health; gender, religious, sexual, racial, and ethnic equality.⁴

A system that creates a fair, honest and equal society.⁵

Social justice is usually understood to refer to processes that provide due process and enforce the rules agreed by a society. Social justice is understood more broadly as that which gives individuals or groups their due within society as a whole, and implies measures that overall ensure fairness in society in the way that rewards and burdens are distributed. In the modern world it is central to the debates about “north” and “south” economic and political relationships. One of the main modern theorists of social justice is John Rawls who suggested that it is guaranteed by a set of liberties that reasonable citizens in all states should respect and uphold. The list proposed by Rawls matches the normative human rights mentioned above that have international recognition, showing the close relationship between social justice and rights.⁶

[Social justice] refers to the attainment of a more equitable society, to which the University contributes through the transforming power of education.⁷

A concept based upon the belief that each individual and group within a given society has a right to civil liberties, equal opportunity, fairness and participation in the educational, economic, institutional, social and moral freedoms and responsibilities valued by the community.⁸

A Catholic website defines it this way,

The respect for the human person and the rights which flow from human dignity and guarantee it. Society must provide the conditions that allow people to obtain what is their due, according to their nature and vocation.⁹

Back to a secular, definition, notice the difference between what follow and the Catholic definition immediately above,

[Social justice] is the equitable redistribution of wealth and power allowing individuals to meet their necessary needs.¹⁰

³ <http://lgbtcenter.ucdavis.edu/lgbt-education/social-justice-terms-1>

⁴ http://www.unesco.org/education/tlsf/TLSF/intro/glossary_links/glossary.htm

⁵ <http://www.communityservices.qld.gov.au/youth/glossary.html>

⁶ <http://www.freedomofexpression.org.uk/glossary/3#letters>

⁷ <http://www.deakin.edu.au/equity-diversity/definitions.php>

⁸ <http://www.bcsth.ca/content/glossary>

⁹ <http://www.thesacredheart.com/dictnary.htm>

¹⁰ <http://www.oup.com/uk/orc/bin/9780199215546/01student/glossary/online/>

A sarcastic definition from “The Liberal Lexicon” at The Free Republic (a politically conservative e-zine) says this,

That wonderful principle which defines society as a paint-by-the-numbers pastiche of equally entitled victim-groups who should be deliberately included in the outer, larger society according to their guilt-driven social demographic percentages, not by personal achievement. Social Justice is the demand for a Numeric Parliamentary Model of society based on "fairness," specifically "Political Identity Fairness." Since blacks, women, and gays have been hurt by American history, it only makes sense that adjustments must be made in the American future to correct these ancient, systemic inequities. Social Justice is the realization that some (all) liberal special-interest groups deserve more than they've got (or earned), and that it's the role of Liberal-Activist Government to legally provide these people with the lives they truly deserve by redistributing The Wealth from the oppressor class to the victim class.¹¹

A definition from an apostate “church” that marries homosexuals says this,

The gift of Social Justice is the special ability God gives to certain members of the body of Christ to act for justice for the oppressed, to confront unjust situations and work towards peace & equality for all. (see Luke 4:18, 2 Corinthians 1:14, Phil. 2:4-5, Amos 5:14-15,24)¹²

Obviously, the definitions vary significantly. However, there is a common thread among them, and it goes something like this:

Social justice is when groups within a society or the majority of a society (1) recognize a *societally* perceived need within certain groups in their society, and then (2) the people that perceived the need claim that the rest of society is now obligated to meet those needs.

Given that summary definition, let's review our foundational question: “*Does the Law of Christ have a transformative agenda for society?*”

Many modern Calvinistic Christian pastors and leaders associated with the Acts 29 movement, the Southern Baptist Convention, and other evangelical denominations, groups, and associations say yes. Because Christians recognize that sin makes life difficult for everyone¹³, they feel compassion for their fellow man and want to help in some way. Christians who think that the Church should have a transformative agenda for society have suggested that believers ought be planting churches in cities and focusing much of their energy on ministering to needy

¹¹ <http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-news/673701/posts>

¹² http://www.mcctoronto.com/volunteering/sg_definitions.htm

¹³ Everyone “groans” due to the effects the corrupted creation has on all people (Rom. 8:22). Unbelievers recognize this too, they just account for it different ways (i.e., naturalism, pantheism, animism, etc.).

unbelievers in those cities as a means to fulfill that agenda. While we believe this can be a good thing to do, we believe that the theology and hermeneutics¹⁴ behind it is misguided in several ways. This paper will be a discussion of how bad hermeneutics creates poor theology that leads to misguided but well-intentioned activity in regards to the church's responsibility to unbelieving society. As a result, we will provide a Biblical alternative from the perspective of New Covenant Theology (NCT).

A Social Justice Evangelical Case Study: Dr. Tim Keller

Since Tim Keller is a highly respected and influential evangelical player in the conversation about the church's role in social justice issues, we will refer to his online article titled *The Gospel and the Poor* as an example of what some Calvinistic evangelicals have in mind when they speak of engaging in "social justice". In that article, he gives his working definition of social justice in his opening thesis,

The thesis is that all Christians are to minister in both word and deed especially to those in the world lacking material goods, 'social capital', and power. I'll refer to the weak, elderly, mentally and physically handicapped, refugees, new immigrants, working poor, natural disaster victims, unemployed, single parent families, orphans—all under the heading of 'the poor'.¹⁵

- One of the primary critiques I have is that Keller mishandles the Scripture to substantiate his point (i.e., using Scripture out of context, eisegesis, etc.).
- As a result, he has a definition of the poor that seems to come from the realm of a secular sociology textbook rather than Scripture. For instance, he used the word "unemployed" in his definition, yet we all know or are aware of people who are unemployed but are either independently wealthy and/or had such a large salary that they aren't in a hurry any time soon to get a job. Of course there are people that are unemployed and hence destitute, but Keller seems to create an unbiblical category from the beginning.
- Thus, our disagreement will ultimately be rooted in a fundamental interpretational difference that I think is solved with an NCT view of law.

Creation

Keller refers first to the "dominion mandate" using Gen. 1:28 to substantiate his point:

God blessed them; and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth." (Gen. 1:28 NAU)

A. Creation. Adam is told to have dominion over all creation, both the physical and spiritual realms, to bring it under the order and rule of God (Gen. 1:28). God's servants are, therefore, to be concerned to subdue physical disorder as well as spiritual disorder caused by sin. Both are fundamental to covenant service.

¹⁴ Hermeneutics is the process of properly interpreting the Bible.

¹⁵ <http://www.ihopeonline.org/>

It is here that Keller's Covenant Theology (CT) rears its head. As a Presbyterian Church of America pastor, Keller embraces CT, and CT has historically taught that the dominion mandate given to Adam still applies today. With CT, we have an obligation as believers in the spiritual and social realm. According to CT, we are to affect the spiritual as well as the social aspects of society. This is part of the historical warp and woof of CT.

- Regarding Keller's use of Genesis 1:28, all it says is to have children, then subdue the earth to fulfill that goal. This is all the text in context is saying. However, if there's more to Gen. 1:28 than that, then we have to look elsewhere in scripture to see if that's true.
- If we want to determine how people under the Old Testament era were to subdue the earth, we look at the time period from Adam to Moses, which reiterates the dominion mandate to fill the earth in Gen. 9:7.
- If we look at the Old Covenant era to the cross, they were supposed to subdue things by taking control of the land of Canaan and living in it to serve Yahweh (Num. 33:50-54).
- From Pentecost to the second coming believers are *not* given a clear command in context to subdue the earth as Adam was.
- There isn't a social mandate (as Keller defines it) anywhere in Gen. 1:28.

The Fall

B. Fall. Sin defaces all of nature. Man is alienated from God (Gen. 3:8) causing guilt and hostility to the knowledge of the Lord. Man is alienated from himself (Gen. 3:10), causing loss of identity and loss of meaning, as well as anxiety and emptiness. Thirdly, man is alienated from other men (Gen. 3:7), causing war, crime, family breakdown, oppression, and injustice. Finally, man is alienated from nature itself (Gen. 3:17-19), causing hunger, sickness, aging, and physical death. . . .

Then to Adam He said, "Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten from the tree about which I commanded you, saying, 'You shall not eat from it'; Cursed is the ground because of you; In toil you will eat of it All the days of your life. ¹⁸ "Both thorns and thistles it shall grow for you; And you will eat the plants of the field; ¹⁹ By the sweat of your face You will eat bread, Till you return to the ground, Because from it you were taken; For you are dust, And to dust you shall return." (Gen. 3:17-19 NAU)

- Gen. 3:17-19 tells us that sin affects the physical world and makes life more difficult (to providing for family, earning a living, raising crops, pain in childbirth, etc., because creation is cursed).
- We are not alienated from creation per Gen. 3:17-19, but it is more difficult for us to live our daily lives due to the effects of sin on the creation.

Keller continues on,

God's first redemptive action, the clothing of Adam and Eve, points to the salvation of Christ's sacrifice, but it also meets a deep psychological need (for privacy) and a fundamental physical need (for shelter). In this first deed of

ministry, God reveals that his redemption will heal all the effects of sin. We must follow Him in our own patterns of ministry.

- He's referring to the protoevangelion of Gen. 3:15.
- Gen. 3:15 is a veiled prophetic reference to the sacrifice of Christ.
- Gen. 3:21 is *not* a statement about Adam and Eve needing privacy or shelter or that being clothed with animal skins was representative of the need for a sacrifice because Scripture nowhere else says so.

The Patriarchal Period

C. Patriarchal period. Abraham's seed (through Joseph) first becomes a blessing to the nations through a hunger relief program (Gen 41:53-57). Job, who lived in this period, is aware that God's judgment falls on those who forget the poor (Job 29:15-16; 31:16-23).

When the seven years of plenty which had been in the land of Egypt came to an end,⁵⁴ and the seven years of famine began to come, just as Joseph had said, then there was famine in all the lands, but in all the land of Egypt there was bread.⁵⁵ So when all the land of Egypt was famished, the people cried out to Pharaoh for bread; and Pharaoh said to all the Egyptians, "Go to Joseph; whatever he says to you, you shall do."⁵⁶ When the famine was *spread* over all the face of the earth, then Joseph opened all the storehouses, and sold to the Egyptians; and the famine was severe in the land of Egypt.⁵⁷ *The people of* all the earth came to Egypt to buy grain from Joseph, because the famine was severe in all the earth. (Gen 41:53-57 NAU)

- Context: Joseph is in charge in Egypt while his family is still in Canaan. In chapter 42, Jacob's sons come to get food because of the famine.
- Is this a model for a divine food-relief program? No! Its simply a narrative showing that God sovereignly provided for Egypt in order to help Jacob's family so that they would be brought into Egypt so that the promise to Abraham would be fulfilled and the Old Covenant would begin. This has nothing to do with a divine food relief program!

Keller continues,

Job, who lived in this period, is aware that God's judgment falls on those who forget the poor (Job 29:15-16; 31:16-23).

"I was eyes to the blind And feet to the lame. ¹⁶ "I was a father to the needy, And I investigated the case which I did not know." (Job 29:15-16 NAU)

- Job was kind to the poor (contrary to his "comforter's" false accusations).
- God sovereignly decided to allow Satan to do this to Him to show that God is sovereign.
- The friends tried to argue that God was judging him because he didn't care for the poor, but this was a false accusation as the text indicates by God rebuking them for it later.
- Thus, Keller uses the false accusation of Job's comforters to make his point.

- We can't say anything else about this passage unless the Bible tells us there is something more that is there that the passage itself doesn't tell us.

Early Israel

D. Early Israel.

God gave Israel many laws of social responsibility. Kinsmen and neighbors were obligated to give to the poor man until his need was gone (Deut. 15:8-10). Tithes went to the poor (Deut. 14:28-29). The poor were not to be given simply a "handout", but tools, grain (Deut. 15:12-15) and land (Lev. 25), so that they can become productive and self-sufficient.

“ . . . but you shall freely open your hand to him, and shall generously lend him sufficient for his need in whatever he lacks.”⁹ “Beware that there is no base thought in your heart, saying, ‘The seventh year, the year of remission, is near,’ and your eye is hostile toward your poor brother, and you give him nothing; then he may cry to the LORD against you, and it will be a sin in you.¹⁰ “You shall generously give to him, and your heart shall not be grieved when you give to him, because for this thing the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in all your undertakings.” (Deut. 15:8-10 NAU)

- Context: The seventh year is the year of canceling debts and people were begrudging loaning money.
- This is in the context of the Mosaic Law governing all aspects of Israelite society. Thus, Mosaic Law *did* have a social agenda.
- Problem: The Mosaic Law came to an end with the cross/Pentecost (Eph. 2:14-16; Col. 2:14-17).
- Thus, if the law of Christ doesn't repeat this in some form, then we are not under this law. Its fruitless to appeal to Deut. 15 to argue for a social agenda in the New Covenant era per Keller's definition unless you are also appealing to a New Covenant passage that brings this teaching over in this same manner.

Later Israel

D. Later Israel. The prophets condemned Israel's insensitivity to the poor as covenant breaking. They taught that materialism and ignoring the poor are sins as repugnant as idolatry and adultery (Amos 2:6-7). Mercy to the poor is an evidence of true heart commitment to God (Is. 1:10-17; 58:6-7; Amos 4:1-6; 5:21-24). The great accumulation of wealth, "adding of house to house and field to field till no space is left" (Is. 5:8-9), even though it is by legal means may be sinful if the rich are proud and callous toward the poor (Is. 3:16-26; Amos 6:4-7). The seventy-year exile itself was a punishment for the unobserved Sabbath and jubilee years (II Chron. 36:20-21). In these years the well-to-do were to cancel debts, but the wealthy refused to do this.

“Is this not the fast which I choose, To loosen the bonds of wickedness, To undo the bands of the

yoke, And to let the oppressed go free And break every yoke? ⁷ "Is it not to divide your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into the house; When you see the naked, to cover him; And not to hide yourself from your own flesh?" (Isa. 58:6-7 NAU)

- The context has to do with God doing something positive with Israel in the future after judging them.
- Israel had a clear social agenda under the Mosaic Law: It is true that under the Old Covenant, social justice issues took front burner because you have to take care of the physical theocratic nation and it is in that context that Isaiah is writing.
- Problem: In context, these are commands for Israel, yet Christians don't live under the Mosaic Law but under Christ's law.
- God is giving Israel as a physical theocratic nation promises that are consistent with their Old Covenant social agenda but their social agenda under the Mosaic Law cannot be read into the New Covenant era and thus made binding upon believers.
- Gleanings in the fields to provide for the poor; tithes to Levitical system to maintain it. All of these things are necessary for a physical, theocratic nation.
- Also, it is only within Israel that this social agenda takes place. It didn't exceed their borders and didn't benefit Gentiles outside of their borders. There was no evangelistic focus, but God chose to only bless the nation of Israel in the Old Covenant era (cf. Psa. 147:19-20).
- Keller's CT puts theological blinders on him such that he reads Old Covenant Mosaic Law requirements into the New Covenant era in his argument for social justice.
- Law of Christ doesn't give us that kind of social agenda as we are a spiritual nation (1 Peter 2:8-9) and we don't have those laws given to us to transform society.

The Ministry of Jesus

E. The ministry of Christ. Jesus proves to the Baptist that he is the Christ by pointing out that he heals bodies and preaches to the poor (Matt 11:1-6) even as the prophets said he would (Is.11:1-4; 61:1-2 cf. Luke 1:52-53).

When Jesus had finished giving instructions to His twelve disciples, He departed from there to teach and preach in their cities. ² Now when John, while imprisoned, heard of the works of Christ, he sent word by his disciples ³ and said to Him, "Are You the Expected One, or shall we look for someone else?" ⁴ Jesus answered and said to them, "Go and report to John what you hear and see: ⁵ the BLIND RECEIVE SIGHT and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the POOR HAVE THE GOSPEL PREACHED TO THEM. ⁶ "And blessed is he who does not take offense at Me." (Matt. 11:1-6 NAU)

- Problem: The significance of this passage is Jesus fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah 61 to prove that He's the coming Messiah, not to justify a social agenda to care for the poor.
- The fact that Jesus fulfilled prophecy to prove that He's the Messiah is a completely different issue than how to deal with the unbelieving poor, indigent, and outcast.
- Thus, not only does Keller misunderstand the purpose of the Mosaic Law as it pertains to a believer's responsibility to the poor under the New Covenant, but he also plays fast and

loose with Jesus' fulfillment of prophecy by trying to argue that that somehow obligates us to do what Jesus did.

- In other words, we shouldn't be asking "What Would Jesus Do?" because we're not Jesus; but instead we should ask "What Would Jesus Have Me to Do?"

Keller continues,

Jesus teaches that anyone who has truly been touched by the grace of a merciful God will be vigorous in helping the needy (Luke 6:35-36; Matt. 5:43-48). God will judge whether we have justifying faith or not by looking at our service to the poor, the refugee, the sick, the prisoner (Matt. 25:44-46).

"You have heard that it was said, 'YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR and hate your enemy.'⁴⁴ "But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,⁴⁵ so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.⁴⁶ "For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?⁴⁷ "If you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?⁴⁸ "Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." (Matt. 5:43-48 NAU)

"But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High; for He Himself is kind to ungrateful and evil men.³⁶ "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful." (Luke 6:35-36 NAU)

- Context: Jesus is talking to physical, unbelieving Israel and telling them what true, spiritual Israel looks and acts like. People who are believers will exhibit real Kingdom living (i.e., loving one's enemies) vs. the false Kingdom living of the unbelieving Israelites. Jesus raises the law to a higher level and one of the identifying marks of a changed heart in the New Covenant era is love for one's enemies versus hating them (Deut. 23:3-6; cf. also Psa. 139:21-22).
- Jesus lays the context for Paul's later ministry as he takes the gospel to the enemies of Israel, i.e., the Gentiles (Gal. 2:8).

Keller continues,

Jesus, in his incarnation, "moved in" with the poor (Luke 2:24; II Cor. 8:9). He lived with, ate with, and associated with the lowest class of society. He called this "mercy" (Matt. 9:13). The Bible demands that we emulate Him in it (II Cor. 8:8-15).

- The last sentence is scary because it puts a yoke on people that Christ never intended for them to bear. Is Keller saying that all or most Christians should move in with the unbelieving poor?
- Christ went to the poor, wealthy, tax collectors, religious leaders, etc. He gave them all the same message.

- The fundamental error is that of reading your agenda into Jesus' ministry as Messiah and then using that to substantiate a point that the text itself doesn't make.
- Matt. 9:13 is in the context of having dinner with Matthew, a wealthy tax collector (vv. 9-13); it has nothing whatsoever to do with the poor. Jesus was willing to go to *anyone* who was in need, whether poor or wealthy.
- 2 Cor. 8:8-15 – The context of this passage has to do with Paul collecting funds for poor believers in Palestine. He's calling on the Corinthians to respond to the *believer's* needs, not that of unbelievers. This is simply an example of caring for other believers. Note also that v. 9 indicates that we benefit from Christ's work primarily spiritually, not materially; and that spiritual benefit of a new heart gives us a changed life whereby we joyfully desire to help the brethren (2 Cor. 9:6-7).

The Early Church

F. The early church. The church reflects the social righteousness of the old covenant community, but with the greater vigor and power of the new age.

- This is comparing apples with oranges. Keller is saying that we are essentially the same as the Old Covenant community, but now that we've got the Spirit we can do more. Keller's methodology is one of the results of CT's flattening out of the biblical covenants because they see the New Covenant as a "newer" administration of the one same Covenant of Grace that supposedly started in Genesis 3.
- NCT would say, no because Old Covenant community was primarily unbelieving and were under a tutor that micromanaged every aspect of their lives. The members of the New Covenant *all* know the Lord, *all* have their sins forgiven, and *all* have radically changed lives because they are all regenerated and controlled by the Spirit (Heb. 8:10-12).
- He's not taking the social agenda of the Mosaic Law and applying it here. We live under a different version of God's law that has a different emphasis now.

Keller continues,

Following the prophets, the apostles teach that true faith will inevitably show itself through deeds of mercy (James 2:1-23).

- Indeed, NCT affirms wholeheartedly that if Jesus died to pay for your sins, He purchased a transformed life that will inevitably lead you to care for others.
- James 2 is saying that you *cannot* be a true believer if you don't care for other believers, but that's a very different discussion than that of having a social agenda in the New Covenant era in the way that Keller defines it.
- The New Covenant is essentially *silent* on the issue of social justice as defined by Keller.

The Consummation

G. The end of history. The goal of history is a new heavens and new earth--a totally restored creation. Holistic ministry looks to and is victorious in the consummation.

Keller then goes on to use an idea from one my favorite apologists, Francis Schaeffer to support his point,

(See Francis Schaeffer, *Pollution and the Death of Man*, Tyndale, 1970, pp. 81-93.) The church is to use its gifts and power to heal all the results of sin, spiritual, psychological, social, physical.

- Contrary to Schaeffer/Keller, NCT teaches that our emphasis is to take the gospel to a fallen world and as people become believers, we disciple them in the truth, and they positively affect *everything* they come into contact with.
- Matthew 5:16 – We are commanded to live a godly life in front of unbelievers that gives a convincing testimony of the saving power of God and also provides a check-rein against the general spread of evil and corruption in our culture as we live out of lives to the glory of God. Everything true believers touch positively affects the world and serves as one of God’s means of supernatural restraint against utter corruption and anarchy in the world¹⁶.
- However, being salt and light in the unbelieving world through proclaiming and living out the gospel is a very different issue than saying that believers are obligated by Christ’s law to fulfill a social agenda given Keller’s definition of it.

Thus, in much social justice discussion among Christians, you see them try to justify it in three primary ways with Keller’s paper being an example:

1. Appeal to the Dominion/Creation mandate.
2. Appeal to the Old Covenant.
3. Appeal to the ministry of Jesus.

We have tackled these issues already, so let’s review and then answer our foundational question:

Does the Law of Christ have a transformative agenda for society?

Answer: No. None of the above three paradigms are models for the Christian.

Slavery and the Law of Christ: A Biblical Test Case for Social Justice

According to the Law of Christ, what *is* our agenda in the New Covenant era? Let’s look at Ephesians 6:5-9 in regards to slavery,

Slaves, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in the sincerity of your heart, as to Christ;⁶ not by way of eyeservice, as men-

¹⁶ The other built-in God-ordained evil restraining mechanism is God’s common grace.

*pleasers, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart.*⁷ *With good will render service, as to the Lord, and not to men,*⁸ *knowing that whatever good thing each one does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether slave or free.*⁹ *And masters, do the same things to them, and give up threatening, knowing that both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no partiality with Him.* (Eph. 6:5-9 NAU)

- In v. 9, one would think that if Paul were concerned with “social justice” as understood by modern proponents, then he would have urged Christian slave owners to immediately free their slaves; but he doesn’t! After all, if the slaves are Christians, they are part of the one, same, family of God, and have equal status with their slave owners before God, both ontologically *and* spiritually.
- However, given that Paul’s didn’t command Christian slave owners to free their slaves, he obviously had a different agenda than that of the modern advocates of social justice (cf. Philemon).
- The law of Christ doesn’t say that a New Covenant believer that’s a slave owner in a country that allows it is *necessarily* in sin (cf. v. 9).
- Eph. 6:9 was a perfect opportunity for Paul to address social justice issue # 1 and say that slavery in and of itself is evil, but he didn’t do it.

So what are we to make of this?

- First, please know that I am *not* advocating slavery. I’m merely using it as a biblical test case for this discussion. I believe slavery is an obvious denial of people being equal image bearers of God (Gen. 1:26-27), but when you are dealing with fallen people, they make bad laws and sometimes for His own sovereign purposes, God is not pleased to remedy those bad laws; at least not in this present age.
- Second, please remember that we are to be salt and light in our culture, which means that as we live our lives to the glory of God we are going to seek what’s best for those around us. If that means that we have the opportunity to legislate against slavery in a country that practices it because that’s what’s best for people who are created in the image of God, then we are to seek what’s best for all men in general (Matt. 5:16; Rom. 12:16; Eph. 6:10; Phil. 2:3-5; Philem.)¹⁷.
- Third, we are to be obedient to God regardless in whatever circumstances we have found ourselves in and that means that as we live our lives to the glory of God in our spheres of influence, this *will* affect a positive change in the lives of others, including unbelievers (i.e., the abolition of slavery in England and America in the 18-19th centuries by evangelical Christians such as John Newton and William Wilberforce).

¹⁷ We also fail to remember (1) that without both Hebrew and Roman slavery, many people would’ve been destitute, and (2) slavery in the American south is *not* the same as slavery in ancient Hebrew culture and the Roman Empire. For a detailed discussion re: slavery in the Bible, see Paul Copan, *Is God a Moral Monster?*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), 124-157, Christopher J.H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*. Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004. Murray Harris, *Slave of Christ: A New Testament Metaphor for Total Devotion to Christ*. Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999, and for an introductory presentation, see John MacArthur, *Slave*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2010.

- Fourth, we can't make a *Biblical* case for fighting against slavery (or any other social ill) under the law of Christ if that slavery is done in accordance with Eph. 6:9 in a country that permits it.

We have been trained to think that when we see a social ill that we need to do as much as possible to change it, but Paul wasn't concerned about remedying social ills like slavery; **his point was that whatever situation God has sovereignly placed us in, we are to honor Him in that situation.**

Thus, contrary to what Keller proclaims, it is *not* the church's job to "... use its gifts and power to heal all the results of sin, spiritual, psychological, social, physical." This is not the emphasis of the law of Christ.

So where do we as the church get our agenda? Answer: We get it from the teaching passages of the New Covenant.

- The church's agenda for the unbelieving world is to preach the gospel to them, not to fix their own sin-created social problems.
- The church's agenda for believers is to engage in mutual encouragement, edification, and building up the body for more useful service to the King.
- Many of these social ills are remedied simply through conversion. People don't abort children and refuse to work when they have regenerated hearts because they love Jesus (1 Tim. 5:18; 2 Thess. 3:10; John 15:12).
- Some of these social ills are part of what God has ordained to drive people to faith in Christ. Suffering is often a means to drive people to God for hope in Christ (Matt. 5:4; 11:28-30).
- Social injustice will continue until the New Heavens and New Earth because we live in a cursed world with fallen, evil people. We neither have the ability nor the responsibility to undo *all* social ills because that is Christ's responsibility at His return (Isa. 9:6-7). Our job is to live faithfully in the context in which God has sovereignly placed us to His eternal glory and as we do that, we watch God effect change in our spheres of influence as we live by the power of the Holy Spirit.

So, while the church isn't responsible to rid the earth of social injustice, this doesn't mean that believers will not positively affect society. It just means that we will use any power or influence we have to affect society by first and foremost living for King Jesus and by preaching the gospel. This has a seasoning effect on our surrounding culture that stems from the ground up and not from the top down.

IN CONCLUSION, we are to love the unbeliever, but the way that we do this will play itself out in different ways from person to person as we live out our love for Jesus by using our spiritual gifts. This may mean street preaching and evangelism for one whereas another volunteers at the local rescue mission to evangelize those in need of Christ, or the crisis pregnancy care center worker who counsels abortive mothers, or it simply may mean that a stay-at-home mom faithfully supports the discipleship work that her husband is doing with their children. Our focus should be to preach the gospel to the unbeliever in whatever socially compromised context we find them. It does the unbeliever no spiritual good if they have a full belly, a nice set of clothes, and have kept their babies if they deny Jesus and die and go to Hell.

