

Let Justice Roll Down:

The call to be a different kind of people

by M. Daniel Carroll R.

Our title comes from a well-known phrase from the Old Testament prophet Amos (5:24). That poetic book begins by denouncing the injustices committed by the nations surrounding Israel but then turns to condemn stridently the sins of those who called themselves the people of God. Yahweh demanded social justice from Israel. In fact, the practice of social justice was to be inseparable from who they were as his redeemed nation and was fundamental to their witness to the world.

What about the people of God today? Has Yahweh placed the same mandate on Christians and the church?

A New Awakening to Social Justice

The last several years have witnessed a growing social concern among evangelical Christians and an increasing desire to impact the public square. Examples abound. Pastor Rick Warren, of "Purpose Driven Church" and "Purpose Driven Life" fame, is mobilizing Christians to grapple with global social ills, especially the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Before the last national election the NAE (National Association of Evangelicals) produced an important document, "For the Health of the Nation: An Evangelical Call to Civic Responsibility," which spoke to multiple topics, including compassion for the poor and human rights. Social activists Ron Sider and Jim Wallis recently published books designed to persuade evangelicals to reassess their social life and political alliances.² The list could go on.

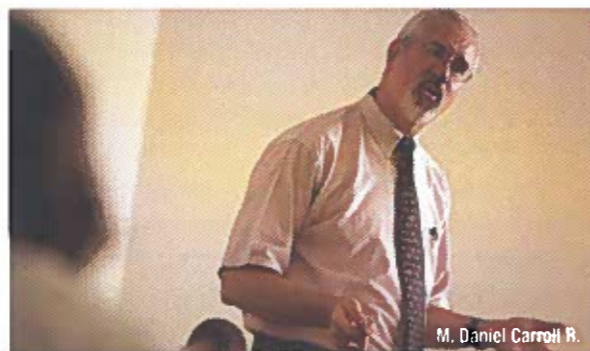
It has not always been so. Beginning in the opening decades of the twentieth century, conservative Christians increasingly became suspicious of any entanglement in social issues. In what has been called "the Great Reversal," they abandoned the championing of social causes that long had been a hallmark of the faith. There are several explanations for this change, but the primary reason was that conservatives were reacting to the theological currents of the time. Liberalism, which questioned such doctrines as the inspiration and authority of the Bible and the deity of Christ, was making considerable inroads in denominations and seminaries. In those circles, the good news of salvation was reinterpreted in terms of the advancement of democracy and socio-economic betterment. In response to this "Social Gospel," many Christians limited the task of the church to personal evangelism, or the salvation of souls, to the exclusion of social engagement.

This focus, born as it was of those fundamentalist-modernist controversies, did not go unquestioned. From early on, significant voices such as that of Carl F. H. Henry, spoke out against that individ-

ualistic, pietistic overreaction.³ Nevertheless, these generally represented a minority view. Fresh winds, though, are now blowing.

Clarifying Issues and Definitions

The quandary for many lies in trying to articulate the proper relationship between the spiritual and the social. For those who believe that evangelism is the primary mission of Christians, participation in issues of justice is defined as providing a bridge to evangelism—that is, it can offer opportunities to share Jesus Christ as the solution to every person's spiritual separation from God, an eternal fact which transcends all physical and social needs. From this perspective, social involvement also is appreciated as something that can come as a result of becoming a Christian. More and more evangelicals, however, are moving to the stance that these concerns should be an integral part of Christian mission, without in any way minimizing the necessity of personal conversion.



M. Daniel Carroll R.

Once the imperative of *social justice* is accepted, certain distinctions can prove helpful. On the one hand, the term *social action* refers to acts of charity and initiatives by individuals or groups of believers to meet immediate or more circumscribed problems, such as responding to a natural disaster or helping with troubled youth. On the other hand, *commitment to social change* implies attempting to put right systemic wrongs, like racial

discrimination or economic exploitation. Not a few evangelicals are comfortable with the former, but many are reticent in regards to the latter (except in regards to a few issues, like abortion). In terms of Christian mission, broadly conceived, perhaps it is best to think more generally in terms of God's *social demand* for justice. The particular issues that need addressing would vary from community to community and country to country. The remedies that Christians could pursue also would be context specific. They would be guided

by a wide range of factors, like historical precedents, possibilities of cooperative efforts, political viability, financial constraints, demographic presence and serious biblical and theological study.

Surveying the Call to Justice in the Bible

The material in the Bible on *social justice* is vast. Only an overly brief survey can be offered here.

The first sin after the Fall is fratricide: Cain murders Abel, whose blood cries out to heaven. God condemns the killing (Gen. 4:8-12), but violence spreads unchecked (6:11). In the midst of this rebellious world, epitomized by the arrogant construction of the Tower of Babel (11:1-9),

Yahweh calls an individual, Abram. Through this man and his descendents, Yahweh would bless the families of the earth (12:1-3). A study of the rest of the book of Genesis reveals that this blessing is both spiritual and physical, ranging from the building of altars and the proclamation of the name of God to Joseph's helping Egypt avoid starvation.⁴ The justice of the patriarchs was to be a light to all nations (18:18f.).

Centuries later, Yahweh responded to the suffering of his people and freed them from oppression (Exod. 2:23-25). In the Law given at Sinai and repeated before the crossing of the Jordan River into Canaan (Exod. 20-40; Deut.), God revealed the foundations of a new kind of society, different from the cruel sociopolitical arrangements of the rest of the ancient world. Debts were to be periodically forgiven (Lev. 25; Deut. 15), and a series of mechanisms were stipulated at familial and communal levels to aid the poor, widows, orphans, and the destitute foreigner. Kings were to operate with a set of values that contradicted the ideologies of power and wealth accumulation so common then, and now (Deut. 17: 14-20; cf. Ps. 72).

The importance of justice to Yahweh is especially evident in passages that deal with worship. Worship without justice is unacceptable, because it does not concern itself with what is vital to the heart of God (Ps. 15; Isa. 1:10-20; Am. 5:21-24; Mic. 6:1-8). The Messiah, whom the prophets predicted was to come in the "fullness of time," would reign in the Spirit and establish justice on the earth (Isa. 11:1-9, 42:1-4). One day war would cease, and humanity would finally enjoy peace and abundance (Mic. 5:1-4).

In the synagogue at Nazareth at the start of his ministry, Jesus quoted a messianic passage full of social concerns (Lk. 4:16-30; cf. Isa. 61:1-2). His ministry was marked by compassion for women, the hungry and the sick. This was proof that he truly was the long-awaited Messiah and that the kingdom of God had come (e.g., Lk. 7:20-23; cf. Isa. 35:5). He called his disciples to follow his example (John 20:21). The early church took that mandate seriously. They shared with those in need and organized themselves to take care of widows (Acts 2, 4, 6). James speaks sharply against those who show prejudice according to social class and do not pay workers a just wage (Jas. 1, 5).

In sum, from Genesis to Revelation, the Bible emphasizes that God is committed to *social justice* and that he expects his people to be, too.

Conclusion

For two millennia the church has been known for its care of the poor and marginalized. Evangelicals in the United States are returning to this calling. Beyond those borders, Christians have long struggled with injustice. As the center of gravity of Christianity shifts to the Two-Thirds, or Majority, World, the theological and pastoral reflections done there should impact thinking on such matters in the United States.⁵

Denver Seminary stands committed to *social justice* both here and abroad. This sentiment can be traced back to its Chancellor, Dr. Vernon Grounds, who over so many years has consistently addressed such issues. In other words, social concern is in our DNA. It is a mark of the institution's faithfulness to the mandate of the church to be a different kind of people in and for the world.

¹Dr. M. Daniel Carroll R. (Rodas) holds the Earl S. Kalland Chair of Old Testament. He is a consulting editor for Prism, the journal of Evangelicals for Social Action.

²Ron Sider, *Scandal of the Evangelical Social Conscience: Why Are Christians Living Just Like the Rest of the World?* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005); Jim Wallis, *God's Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005).

³Carl F. H. Henry, *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1947).

⁴See my "Blessing the Nations: Toward a Biblical Theology of Mission from Genesis," *Bulletin of Biblical Research* 10, no. 1 (2000): 17-34.

⁵See Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).