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God's Call to Pursue Justice

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God's Call to Pursue Justice

Throughout scripture we can see a link between the concepts of love and justice.

Justice is the biblical term for the expectations and rights that should govern how we interact with each other, and especially for how we prioritize responding to the diverse needs within our community.

Love motivates us to respond to the needs we see, justice guides our response through the cloudy waters of fairness, equality of all persons, and competing interests.[1]

As the Church loves others we are compelled to take seriously the needs we see. Jesus told the story of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) to illustrate how love for others crosses cultural boundaries and deals with real needs. But what if we complicate the story by wondering what it also means to love the robbers or the religious leaders who walked on by? Love motivates us, but justice gives us an idea of how to respond and balance God's love for everybody with His specific concern for the powerless.

“In the Old Testament God reveals God's attitude toward the weak and what God correspondingly expected of the strong. The New Testament presupposes this revelation and reinforces it.”[2] In Deuteronomy 10, love and justice are connected to who God is: “For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, mighty, and awesome God who is unbiased and takes no bribe, 18 who justly treats the orphan and widow, and who loves resident foreigners, giving them food and clothing” (Deuteronomy 10:17-18). The Old Testament law mirrored God's example by expecting those who had power in society to use that power to benefit others, especially the powerless.

The Church has been instrumental in challenging systems of injustice and oppression, not simply working to meet individual needs. Just a few examples illustrate this. When the way food was distributed in the early church was not just, the role of Deacon was created to address it. (Acts 6)

Additionally, the book of Philemon is addressed to a Christian slave-owner as a plea to free his slave, even though to do so would have had huge social implications for him and his community. Finally, around 260 CE plagues ravaged the Roman world. It was Christians' heroic, sacrificial care for the sick, dying, and dead of every race and religion that challenged governmental structures of care and legitimized belief in Jesus to the populace at large.[3]

It can be easy for us as the Church today to elevate either explanation or **demonstration** of God's love as most important. But that is partly because we've let them be separated in the first place. And it is true, when the Church sincerely tries to live out Jesus' command to make disciples, we easily slip into thinking only about personal spiritual growth and not about concrete social implications of that growth.[4] And as a Church we can easily promote individual acts of charity while forgetting the powerful witness of a congregation united in pursuing God-reflecting justice for the marginalized.

To love others is to take their needs seriously—people's need for a savior, as well as their need for food, dignity, work, **health**, or freedom from unjust and dehumanizing systems. If we as the Church can equally explain and demonstrate love for others, we will faithfully live out God's call for the Church. People can see what we do, know why we do it, and begin to be drawn into the incredible love of God.

Footnotes:

1. Stephen Charles Mott, *Biblical Ethics and Social Change* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982) 53.
2. *Ibid.*, 76-77
3. "The Legacy of Love," [unityinchrist.com](http://www.unityinchrist.com), 10/3/2014
<http://www.unityinchrist.com/LegacyOfLove.htm>
4. Roger Helland and Leonard Hjalmarson, *Missional Spirituality* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011) 111.