

A STATEMENT ON BIBLICAL JUSTICE

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STATEMENT ON JUSTICE

PREAMBLE

Commitment to justice is intrinsic to Christian faith. In recent times the secular world has taken jurisdiction over many areas of life that are traditional Christian concerns, including charity and justice. This has produced, for some, confusion over the scope of Christian responsibility and commitment in daily living. Many have struggles while trying to reconcile their obedience to God with their ever-changing political and social situations. Too often we cannot reconcile our Christian commitment with specific social realities and political options, and too often we are led to the simplistic solution of denying any Christian concern in this area. For too many people, their view of Christian commitment ends with a church building.

The goal is not to surrender our Christian commitment and concerns to civil authorities, but rather to become clearer within ourselves as to the meaning of the gospel and the nature of Christian commitment. We must continually ask "Who is Jesus Christ for us today" in light of our increased awareness of pressing issues of injustice. Christ is not blind to suffering, poverty and injustice. Christ is not blind to racism, exploitation and the ever-present threat of nuclear holocaust. Christ is not blind to the torture and murder of human beings.

Sometimes our response to immediate needs through charity has kept us from seeing the underlying structures of injustice. We need to reflect on our faith and actions with a view to making our actions more faithful, our commitment deeper, and our love more encompassing. We need to be renewed by God's grace, its power and its twofold message, judgement and reconciliation. We need to renew our obedience to the will of God as we ask what God's will is for us today. We need to find and follow Christ who is in the midst of life, at the centre of our being, who is fully present with us in the midst of suffering, injustice and oppression. And we must continually ask what it means for the church to share in Christ's mission in the world, for the church is called to be where Christ is present.

DEFINING JUSTICE

In the bible, "justice" and "injustice" are used primarily to describe relationships between people, both inter-personal relationships and also relationships between groups. Justice and injustice are seen in the quality of these relationships.

The source of "justice" is the righteous nature of God as revealed in the righteousness of Christ which we received and apprehend through faith. Although the primary meaning of "injustice" is rooted in specific relationships between people, we can also speak of certain acts of justice since we know that God is, by nature, righteous (just). We can say that a just relationship is loving, truthful, compassionate and forgiving, for God is love, God is truth, God is compassionate and God is forgiving.

"Justice" and "injustice" denote two possible poles for relationship. "Justice" denotes a state in which relationships are balanced, harmonious and mutual, wherein each and every person has the freedom to develop their God-given potential as human beings. The terms "injustice" and "sin" both refer to broken and unbalanced relationships. "Injustice" denotes an unbalanced relationship in which one person or group is dominant over another, thereby preventing the victims of the injustice from realizing their God-given potential as human beings and as children of God. The cause of injustice is the power of sin in the world.

"To live justly," is a different concept from "to judge." Our society operates with the secular definition of "justice" whereby it is a matter of judging people according to a standard (law) and then giving people "what they deserve." So understood, "justice" is a legalistic concept. But the view in our biblical heritage is different: we understand justice as an aspect of God's grace in redemption, and therefore it is different from the legalistic understanding which is often prevalent in society. This can be further distinguished from God's own activity of "judging" the world, an activity based upon the presupposition of the existence of the law by which the judgment will be made. Christians are not called to perform God's activity of judging the world, but rather are called to live justly -- in harmony with one another.

There are many reasons for unbalanced relationships, such as power, money, greed, selfishness, racism, sexism, colonialism and cultural patterns of domination. Unbalanced relationships are symptomatic of sinful human existence, the desire to see ourselves as better and more valuable than our neighbor.

God is love, justice and power. In social relationships these three attributes must be kept together. Too often our world favors love apart from justice, justice apart from love and power apart from love and justice. Only when the three are together can we speak meaningfully of "peace on earth." Peace is not simply the absence of war, but is only present when relationships are just. We cannot speak of justice apart from love, nor can we speak of love apart from justice.

REDEMPTION AS NEW CREATION

The intended unity and harmony of God's creation has been disrupted by sin. We are separated from God, from each other and from the world of nature. People exploit and oppress each other. Relationships are unbalanced; injustice is everywhere. Cain murders Abel; soon nations are at war against each other. The weak become slaves to the strong. People no longer have a common language. People claim for themselves the kingdom and the power that properly belong to God alone.

God's work of redemption involves healing the many divisions of the created world, divisions caused by sin. Salvation involves healing these divisions by re-establishing justice and peace among people, and between people and God. Redemption is the story of God recreating justice and peace in the creation.

By participating in Christ's resurrection, Christians participate in God's redemption. The Christian community seeks to express the unity re-established between Creator and creation, the unity of redemption that overcomes the divisions of human society and which impels us to extend this unity throughout the world. Being one in Christ we look forward to the time when the whole human race will be one with God.

Salvation is not a denial of this world, nor an escape from this world, but rather the fulfillment of this world, the recreation of a broken creation. Salvation does not cause us to hate the world but rather informs us of its destiny and meaning and value. The story of salvation is the story of the loving Creator recreating and bringing back into unity a world that is divided and torn.

JUSTIFICATION AS AN ACT OF GOD

Justification is the event by which people are placed into a just relationship with God--a relationship of grace, love, truth, compassion, forgiveness, trust and peace. When we experience a relationship of love and justice with God, the powers of sin within us, which seek to disrupt and pervert our relationship with God, are overcome by the power of God. As we dwell in Christ, and Christ in us, the powers of sin are destroyed and we experience the true meaning of justice and peace.

Justification establishes us in righteousness, which is justice, a just relationship. Righteousness is the purpose of justification, the goal of God's redemption of humanity. In the death of Christ, God made the ultimate sacrifice for the sins of humanity. Through the resurrection came the power of new life or new

righteousness. The gospel tells us that we can participate in the death and resurrection of Christ and thus we partake of the new righteousness God is establishing.

JUSTIFICATION AND CHRISTIAN COMMITMENT

The source of commitment to social justice is the relationship of loving justice which God establishes with people. Our relationship to God through faith permits us to glimpse the reality of justice and peace, and helps us to envision God's original intention for the creation. Our impatience with injustice is rooted in what we have experienced of divine love, namely the just relationship we have with God through faith in Christ.

Injustice is not simply a "social problem" but is an insult to the holiness and righteousness of God. God's salvation permits us to see that social divisions are not divinely ordained limits to human freedom, but rather are the result of human sin and alienation from God. God's redemption condemns our divisions and initiates the project of reconstructing human life so that social relationships might become more just and loving. In God's future, all social divisions are becoming overcome. Our commitment to seek justice and love for the whole of creation arises out of our relationship to God. The commitment is intrinsic to the gospel, the good news of justification and sanctification through Christ. All those who receive justification before God find themselves immediately committed to expanding justice and overcoming the powers of sin and hate that have disrupted relationships in God's creation. The love of God fills us and immediately we need to share that love with the world and especially with our neighbor in need. Conversion to God implies conversion to the neighbour; conversion to the oppressed, the exploited, the hated, the poor, the hungry, the alienated, all who suffer from the structures of injustice.

God's reconciliation through justification is historical in nature. It is based on the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. The powers of sin and evil are concrete powers at work in history. Salvation is not an escape from history but rather liberation from the powers of evil and death, so that we might be God's witnesses in the world. Justification reestablishes our relations with our neighbors in history. God's commitment to us calls us to commitment. Commitment to justice increases as we become aware of the radical incompatibility between the gospel and an alienating society. We see the ways in which we personally are in need of liberation from the powers of evil and we see the need of others to be liberated from unjust social positions. God's love and grace do not invalidate God's will for justice; rather, God's love and grace are fulfilled in justice, and justice is fulfilled through grace and love. To know God is to do justice.

Thus the commitment to justice is not an "option" for Christians; nor is it one of various ways that one might try to "apply" the message of Christianity to the world; nor is it just another of many tasks the church might pursue from time to time. Rather, the commitment to justice is intrinsic to being a Christian, it is of the core of Christianity, and it is at the center of the mission and evangelism of the church as it seeks to heal God's broken and divided creation. The gospel is the message of God's loving justice as revealed in Christ.

JUSTIFICATION BY GRACE APART FROM MERIT OF WORKS

God establishes this relationship of justice or righteousness with people by grace alone, apart from merit or worth. God takes the initiative in restoring our broken relationship. The Holy Spirit gives the power to overcome the rebellious powers of sin. Our participation in the death and resurrection of Christ makes it possible for us to stand before God--in Christ--in a relationship of justice and peace.

God establishes us in justice and peace apart from our own works and merits. There is nothing we can do to merit being justified with God. On our own we are unable to establish a just relationship with God. We cannot perform enough good works to earn the righteousness needed to be just before God. It is only by God's grace that this relationship is possible.

Justification, as reconciliation, is God's action that seeks to embrace the whole creation transforming our relationship with God and each other. God's liberation of the fallen world from the bonds of sin is the basis and result of true human reconciliation. In this way justification becomes part of human life.

The worth of our life, by societal values, falls short of the righteousness which God demands of us. Indeed, everything that may seem worthy and meritorious to us is insufficient to make us righteous in God's sight. Only by trusting in the righteous acts of Christ can we find favor before God. Righteousness is by grace alone.

TRUE COMMUNITY IS A GIFT OF GOD

Community is a gift of God's grace apart from human merits or works. True community is not simply a nation, a social class or an association of individuals. People can gather in groups but only God can create community. Community is a special fellowship that is based on love and justice. Injustice destroys community, justice builds and nourishes community. True community is a gift of God's grace, power, justice and love. God's ultimate gift of community is the kingdom of God.

God calls and establishes this community. Those called together into the community have not been chosen to receive this gift on the basis of their worth. In the Old Testament, God did not establish the community of Israel because the descendants of Abraham were meritorious or righteous people. During the Exodus from Egypt, God called the Hebrews together as a community and established their relationships through the gift of the law. In the New Testament, God's people are called into the community of the church, a fellowship where a relationship has been established by God through Christ apart from "works of law."

Community in Christ is a sign and symbol of God's desire to transform the entire creation. Community represents an overcoming of the divisions of sin and the triumph of justice between people. God seeks to establish and nourish fellowship and justice between all people, continuing the recreation of the world. Through the Holy Spirit and the gifts of grace, God provides for the guidance and nourishment of the community.

SIN IS REVEALED BY GRACE

God's grace reveals injustice. Apart from grace our sinful human condition leads us to believe that people receive what they have earned on the basis of being productive members of society.

Sinful humanity prefers to deny the existence of sin and injustice. Elaborate explanations are often put together to justify society the way it is. People invest pride in the works they have accomplished and do not want to hear God's Word of judgment on human accomplishments. Worldly power operates to perpetuate oppression on behalf of oppressors. Some people in a privileged social position like to believe that their standing is a sign of God's favor and will use their powers to maintain their status. It is a function of God's grace in revealing knowledge, that we are made aware of sin and injustice.

These blindnesses and excuses of the world too often make their way into the church and we can no longer hear God's judgment on our way of life. It is by grace that our blindness is removed and we feel indignant over the sinful shortcomings of society. We thank God when our consciences are aroused over an injustice that we did not perceive. We need to constantly test and examine our beliefs in the context of specific struggles for justice and freedom.

It is often difficult to define the specific meaning of justice for particular social contexts. But Christian commitment senses injustice even before a clear statement of the shape of justice can be formulated in a specific situation. We do not wait until we have a perfect picture of the goal before our commitment results in action. Rather, in fear and trembling, we must respond according to the

options available to us. Our awareness of injustice compels our commitment to focus on a particular problem, and it is in light of our study and understanding of specific injustices that we are able to formulate a practical vision of greater justice for that situation.

THE PRESENCE OF CHRIST

In the incarnation, Jesus was present on earth in the form of poverty and humility. "Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant..." (Phil. 2:5-8). The incarnation shows God's identity with the lowly. Jesus was born in poor and humble surroundings and lived a life that renounced worldly power and riches and success. His ministry gave special attention to preaching God's grace and mercy to the despised of society. At the same time, he brought the message of God's wrath and condemnation to the rich and powerful authorities. Jesus' life confronted the social powers of his day and was sentenced to death by the political authorities. Jesus' life revealed that the condition of oppression is the context of God's presence in the world, thereby magnifying the contradictions between the intent of God's creation and the condition to which it has fallen. In the resurrection we discover that God's power is greater than the powers of this world.

Christ is present today in the historical process of redeeming the world from the social divisions caused by sin. The identity of Christ today cannot be separated from Jesus' identification with the marginalized of society and Christ's presence today is in the struggles of the oppressed. Christ gives freedom to the slaves as they realize their slavery is in defiance to God's will. The presence of Christ in the struggles for justice gives hope and confidence that the power of sin and injustice will be destroyed everywhere. Christ's presence also imparts the strength of the Holy Spirit to endure the many obstacles of the powers of sin.

Through the incarnation, Christ has become bound to our sinful human condition. Thus we know that Christ is found today in the poor and the needy, with the suffering, and among those pushed to the edges of society. Christ today is present among the poor and oppressed. Christ today is the victim of social injustice; as the church joins the victims in their struggle for freedom, we are serving Christ directly. "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of my brethren, you did it to me." (Matt. 25:40).

WHO IS OUR NEIGHBOUR?

In reconciling the iniquities of the community, we do not ask whether the needy are worthy, productive and meritorious individuals. In the light of grace we see that the value of human beings is based on the fact that they are children of God, for who Christ died, apart from their works and successes in life. This gives to all people a value that our sinful and materialistic society cannot always perceive. While the world believes that the place of people in society is determined by people's works and efforts, God's grace reveals that justice is to be established apart from human works and merits, apart from a person's "value of society."

When society declares some people to be more valuable and worthy and successful, this is an aspect of the deception of sin. God's grace sees equal value in all human beings and does not regard worldly standards of worth and success as making some people more meritorious than others. Consequently, God's grace condemns all of the sources of social injustice such as abuse of wealth and power, materialism, racism, sexism and social traditions designed to keep certain people in a subordinate status.

The world is not naturally on the side of justice. Instead, violence, exploitation and domination too often appear as the context for human history. Situations of injustice do not happen by chance nor are they the result of "blind fate." Rather, they result from a selfish will, either personal or collective, that is in bondage to sin. Situations of injustice are formed as those who have more continue to support

structures that prevent an honest sharing with those who have less. God's grace as mercy goes out especially to the victims of injustice.

In the Bible, those deserving special attention are the poor, the widows, the orphans, the sick, the prisoners, the social outcasts, in general those who are oppressed. These are the persons who are in an unjust situation with respect to the dominant powers of their community. Injustice is present where human relations are broken. In different times and places the definition of "injustice" and the definition of who are the oppressed and exploited, may vary. We today are aware of other forms of oppression than only those listed in the Bible. Examples include social class antagonisms, racism, sexism, and colonialism, although all of these are prefigured in various ways in the biblical writings. Different perspectives and continued reflection find new applications for the term "injustice."

The oppressed in one context may not be the oppressed in another context. While we can define poverty in specific terms as the lack of basic material sustenance, our contemporary perspective forces us to go further and recognize the psychological and spiritual dimensions of poverty whereby poverty destroys the essence even when the victim is not materially poor. A man might be an oppressed worker in a factory but go home and be an oppressor over his wife. Thus, changing perspectives produce new depths of insight into injustice.

There is injustice where people have basic needs that society can meet. Yet our understanding of "needs" also defies a universal definition as we move from one context to another. A need in one society is not necessarily a need in another. No social class is free from sin; the oppressor can be found in every human heart.

At the same time we remain faithful to the concrete signs of injustice as portrayed in the Bible and thereby seek to deepen our understanding of where the victims of society are to be found today. The Bible portrays the oppressed as specific people, not as a "general problem." We know that injustice is present whenever people have unmet needs that society could alleviate. We know that injustice is present whenever any person is subordinated to another. We know that the poor and the widows and the lepers remain concrete signs of injustice in our midst that keep us from making "oppression" simply an abstract term. The poor and the oppressed are people, not abstract theological concepts.

THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH IN REDEMPTION

The mission of the church is to preach the gospel, baptize all nations and teach them the commandments of Jesus, and thereby spread the new life of righteousness which God seeks to establish in the creation. Since salvation is God's recreating of the world, the mission of the church encompasses the entire spectrum of human life and its problems. The church is called to work for the healing of the creation in anticipation of God's kingdom. The church is not of the world, yet it is to be in the world, making God's mission its own, building up the body of Christ on earth and foreshadowing the kingdom of God. The church is present where Christ is present.

The pattern for the church's mission is found in the life of Jesus. Christ is present today liberating and redeeming the world from the divisions and strifes caused by sin. The mission of the church is to join with Christ in this struggle, to participate with the victims in their struggles for freedom, to join in the war against all powers and principalities of sin and to be present with Christ among the poor and with the victims of society.

As the church's commitment responds to injustice, we seek by God's grace to rectify the broken relationships of the world. In doing this, it is necessary to analyse the patterns of injustice to specific contexts. The church needs to define the victims, the mechanisms of oppression and the perpetrators of oppression.

The church responds through a prophetic preaching of God's word, which names the demons and exposes their evil to the light. Everyone is called to bear a prophetic witness according to their abilities, seeking to correct the injustices.

The church will follow the leadership of Christ by joining in the struggle for justice by aiding the weak, the powerless and the poor and by calling all to new life.

The mission of the church is not limited by denominational boundaries and parochial traditions. Being faithful to its risen Lord and the Holy Scriptures, the church around the world finds unity in its common mission in society.

GOD'S GIFTS TO THE CHURCH

In fulfilling its mission, the church is encouraged and uplifted by the vision of God's coming kingdom, the ultimate community when God will reign over all and justice and peace will be established between all people. The kingdom is God's ultimate gift of recreating the world. It is a new heaven and a new earth. In the kingdom the hungry are fed, the sick are healed, the oppressed are liberated, the poor are freed from their bondage and all relationships are reconciled in justice and peace.

We participate in the reality of the kingdom as we are reconciled with God. The kingdom becomes a reality within us and in the relationships of the redeemed community. At the same time the kingdom is not yet fulfilled on earth. The kingdom is an all-encompassing reality that demands our whole lives and which will fulfill this world.

In its life of worship, sacraments, preaching and prayer, the church is nourished by God's grace for its mission. The church offers itself to the kingdom and the spirit of Christ brings the new life of the Kingdom to the church.

In baptism we are united in Christ so that we can share in his work of prophet, priest and king. Baptism marks us with the cross and identifies us as daily participants in the death and resurrection of Christ. Baptism brings new life and establishes us in the new community of the kingdom. In baptism, we become members of God's community of justice and we are called to live in righteousness.

In the Eucharist we remember the Passover meal. God's act of deliverance of liberating Israel from slavery to Egypt, calling Israel into a new community. We remember Jesus Christ who, in words and deeds, proclaimed the kingdom and was obedient to the Father's will, even to the giving of his life. In the Eucharist we receive Christ, who establishes among us the new community, the kingdom of God. As the body of Christ on earth, we are nourished from the table for Christ's work in the world. We become the body of Christ on earth today.

Every day God strengthens us and encourages us to pray that God's will shall be done on earth as it is in heaven; that all will receive their daily bread; that all trespasses will be forgiven; that we will be delivered from temptation; and that the kingdom and the power and the glory will be God's forever.