

A RESPONSE TO:

The "Dangers of Social Justice" Panel

by James Roberson and Rasool Berry

Over the last several centuries, evangelicalism has contributed in significant ways to the global church and in particular to American Christianity. We have personally been shaped and formed by its emphasis on the person and work of Christ, the authority of the Scriptures, and its robust outward orientation of evangelism. These distinctives of evangelicalism have shaped our ministry. And yet, like any movement, evangelicalism has its own blind spots. One in particular has been its response to issues of social injustice. Tragically, evangelicalism has tended to prioritize a paranoid preoccupation with the "dangers" of addressing social justice more than it has prioritized the importance of the church speaking out and acting to address social injustice. As Black men who have experienced the legacy of social injustice and who hold to the distinctives of evangelicalism, we believe the church must honor the whole counsel of God by recognizing the rightful calling of the church to advocate for social justice alongside its other divine callings of prophetically preaching against personal immorality, the need for salvation in Jesus Christ, and the authority of God in every area of life: both public and private. In these times, there is a growing reactionary movement meant to dissuade the church's work against such injustice. In the face of such challenges, being faithful to evangelicalism also means pushing back against thinly veiled scare tactics meant to falsely align the biblical concern of social justice with unbiblical beliefs and movements meant to destabilize a Christian worldview.

My (James) great-grandfather started the NAACP in Moss Point, Mississippi in response to the lynchings and violence against Black people that became routine. He was a deacon in his church as well. He embraced the biblical truth that God, in his character, is immediately concerned with righteousness and justice:

*Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne; steadfast love and faithfulness go before you. **Psalm 89:14***

He, like many African American men of God, led the cause of Civil Rights to assert the biblical principle that they were made in the image of God (**Genesis 1:27**) even when most of their evangelical white brothers and sisters rejected that truth. In this sense, his efforts were as much about calling the American church to doctrinal purity as it was to social justice. The two are connected.

In the 1940's, my grandfather, James Roberson Sr., made history by becoming the first African American to work as a manager at a paper mill (which was the town's

major employer). But, in one of the most “Christian” states in the nation, he still had to go to a separate bathroom because of segregation. He served in his local church and fought injustice because he, too, saw those things as inter-connected.

My father was the first African American allowed to walk publically across the stage to receive his Masters degree at Millsaps College. After his conversion, he went on to seminary and became a preacher. He taught me to be aware of the realities of racism in this nation and had the “talk” that every Black father has with his sons about how to interact with law enforcement in a way that will keep you alive. Having grown up in a comfortable middle-class suburb, I thought his warnings were overstated until I found myself at a college party with an officer’s gun about to be drawn because I tried to talk to the officer like I had seen my white peers do in similar situations.

I was the first man in my family to grow up with the opportunity to go to any school or college I wanted to. That was made possible because of this multi-generational fight for social justice - a fight tragically the evangelical church largely was absent from.

The point in bringing up my own story is that too often these discussions on the “dangers of social justice” exist in abstraction and removed from the historical realities of the past. The history, chronicled in *The Color of Compromise* by Jemar Tisby, reveals the sad fact that the evangelical church has too often been complicit in furthering social injustice rather than advocating for social justice, and that history has consequences we are still living out today.

Unfortunately, the evangelical church has tended to be more concerned about the alleged ‘dangers of social justice’ than it has been about the dangers of social injustice and its silence toward it. It is no overstatement to announce that the primary obstacle in our work of evangelism in our area of New York City is evangelicalism’s failure to address social justice issues and its historic complicity in social injustice. The apologetics we must engage to win the unchurched in our urban context focuses on refuting the popular notion that Christianity is simply the tool that white people used to enslave those of African descent and keep them docile. We have to clarify that the false, but pernicious arguments Christians made to justify slavery and segregation - like the mythological “Curse of Ham” - were not accurate biblical teaching. And in a time in which there is more awareness and concern for oppression, we must counter the claim that the Bible is indifferent to the plight of the oppressed, the poor, and the marginalized.

Ours is also the context of many we serve with. Any poll of younger people will show that there is great concern about injustice in our world and great uncertainty about if the Bible has a word about it. The reality is that the dangers of evangelical silence and apathy about social injustice is much greater than any dangers of emphasizing social justice. And yet this argument persists because of some compelling reasons:

1. The primary historical reason for this concern is rooted in the “Fundamentalist - Modernist” Controversy of the early 20th century. This controversy came as a result of the erroneous “higher criticism” approach to Scripture that denied the accuracy and authority of the Bible, the historical death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and the necessity of salvation through Christ alone. In addition to these tensions, the Modernists embraced the “Social Gospel,” which posited that social justice was a sort of collective salvation that could be experienced. With the absence of the theological distinctives of historical orthodoxy, social concern was really all that was left. Fundamentalists rightfully contested these innovations, and yet in doing so, rejected the historical concern the church had toward social injustice and the accurate critiques the Modernists leveled. One of the accurate critiques was that evangelicals tended to support the status quo rather than address social injustice. Another was that the God of the Bible cared about social injustice and that the church, as the signpost and beachhead of the kingdom of God, ought to advocate for social justice. An accurate response would have held to the truth of Scripture while recognizing the Scripture’s advocacy of social justice. As Jesus told the Pharisees:

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: **justice** and **mercy** and faithfulness. *These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others.*

Matthew 23:23-24a (emphases added)

2. Another major reason for the warnings about the “dangers of social justice” stem from the concern that the worldviews of many secular advocates of social justice will infect the church. They see concern about racism, sexism, and poverty in the church as a virus that will also infect the church with postmodernism, Marxism, “liberal doctrine,” and will eventually undermine a biblical vision of sexuality, gender, and humanity. Ultimately “social justice” becomes a Trojan Horse that, to them, sneaks in false ideologies that compromise the church from within. This concern is inconsistent because it doesn’t warn parishioners against voting or participating in our democracy, though many of those who designed our democratic republic (such as Thomas Jefferson or Benjamin Franklin) were deists who denied the possibility of miracles. They don’t warn against embracing advances in medicine or pursuing science as a profession, though many biologists hold to Darwinian evolution. There are many dangers that exist because the church is in the world. Are we to reject ideas that affirm biblical truth because we don’t agree with the worldviews of those who hold them? If so we’d need to reject a lot more than social justice.
3. The church can chew gum and walk at the same time. We can preach the urgency of embracing the gospel of Jesus Christ by faith alone while we also address the tragedy that life outcomes today in our nation are based more on the numbers of young people’s zip codes than the numbers of how they perform on tests. We can lift up the revelation of God’s Word even as we address the fact that we have a broken criminal justice system that tends to work for the wealthy and guilty

more than the poor and innocent. We can promote the holiness of God even as we promote the mercy of God to those who suffer from a host of issues today - from human trafficking, to sexual assault and discrimination. We can expose and confront the dangers of social injustice without falling victim to the dangers of social justice. We can. And if we are to truly be evangelical and biblical about it, the Word tells us we must.

There is a tragic irony that a panel on the “Dangers of Social Justice” takes place in Birmingham, Alabama. In April 1963, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was arrested while advocating for social justice. He took time to respond to white clergy who had been critical of his efforts from a jail cell in Birmingham. He wrote:

Yes, these questions are still in my mind. In deep disappointment I have wept over the laxity of the church. But be assured that my tears have been tears of love. There can be no deep disappointment where there is not deep love. Yes, I love the church. How could I do otherwise? I am in the rather unique position of being the son, the grandson and the great grandson of preachers. Yes, I see the church as the body of Christ. But, oh! How we have blemished and scarred that body through social neglect and through fear of being nonconformists....

But the judgment of God is upon the church as never before. If today's church does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church, it will lose its authenticity, forfeit the loyalty of millions, and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club with no meaning for the twentieth century. Every day I meet young people whose disappointment with the church has turned into outright disgust.

Those same sentiments could be written in 2019. We also see the church as the body of Christ, and also meet young people whose disappointment has turned to disgust. That “sacrificial spirit” must be recaptured for us to demonstrate the full power of the gospel to change individuals and communities or there will just be more disgust.

Just a few months after Dr. King wrote his Letter From A Birmingham Jail, Christians in the city became the center of international attention once more. On September 15, 1963, a bomb exploded at the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham. The blast killed Addie Mae Collins (14), Cynthia Wesley (14), Carole Robertson (14), and Carol Denise McNair (11). It was plotted by four white Ku Klux Klansmen who were also churchgoers. Birmingham became the turning point of the Civil Rights Movement and these precious girls became martyrs. But something else happened when people saw the horror of that injustice and the silence or capitulation of the white evangelical church. They ceased believing the church had a word about such injustice.

Imagine the impact of the witness if the white church in Birmingham had - without reservation - stood with the Black church as it fought for its rights? Imagine the

outcome if, instead of only being concerned about the unbiblical beliefs of people who were committed to the biblical cause of social justice, there was more concern about the dangers of social injustice toward the oppressed, and those in power who carry out oppression. To avoid repeating the sins of the past we must acknowledge them, collectively turn away from them, and turn toward a more excellent way. A way that seeks to chew gum and walk at the same time. As **Micah 6:8** writes:

*He has told you, O man, what is good;
and what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?*

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