

‘Just Us’ or Justice

Malcolm Duncan

Jubilee 2000, Make Poverty History, Trade Justice, Fairtrade churches, Stop the Traffik: with Christians taking such an active role in these campaigns over recent years, there has been every sign that the church is discovering again the reality that it is not ‘just us’ that matters, but instead that justice is very much on God’s heart. From whitebands to Cafedirect, the church is also rediscovering God’s heart and our mission in the world.

A Biblical Agenda for a Post Modern Age

Ask most people in Britain today to name some of the things that the church should be involved in and you’ll hear a common set of answers. Our society expects the church to speak out on behalf of the poor. In fact a survey a few years ago by the Evangelical Alliance showed exactly that. People in Britain want the church to speak out on issues of injustice. They want to hear us call for help for the poor and the unsupported.

There is a challenge in this call, though. For a very long time the church has become known for our stance on traditional moral issues such as abortion, euthanasia, sexuality and protection of the family. Of course we must continue to make the case for the sanctity of marriage and of life. If we do not do so, we fail in our biblical responsibilities. However, the challenge is to allow our morality to shape our views of justice as well. When was the last time you heard a sermon on passage of Scripture such as Amos 5 or Micah 6?

The church – and that means you and me as well as everyone else who belongs to the body of Christ – must make sure that we are following a biblical agenda for the world in which we live. That means that we must not create a notion of God which is Western European, consumerist and happens to have the same preferences and soap boxes as we do. It is amazing, don’t you think, that we hear so little preaching and challenge about how we spend our money, whether we shop ethically, what we do with our time and the way we invest our pensions but so much preaching and challenge about the need for morality and values to be pushed up the agenda for British society. We should not be silent about the issues that matter deeply to us – because they matter so much we should speak out. But we need to discover the broader biblical agenda that we have always been called to follow. That agenda forces us to stand with the excluded, the poor, the oppressed and the marginalised. We do not stand neutral, we stand with them because God stands with them. Once we grasp the nettle of engaging with people, everything starts to change.

Changing the way we do things

Church becomes more authentically a set of relationships centred around Christ. We maintain the distinctives of being people who worship and love God and serve him individually and together, but we become a community that has a central purpose that can be articulated in two ways, both of which are encapsulated in the great command of the Lord Jesus himself. We love the Lord our God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength and we love our neighbour as we love ourselves.

Just because we know this amazing commandment doesn’t mean we can treat it lightly. In fact, the old adage is true, familiarity breeds contempt – or at the very least

indifference. As Christians we have a clear mandate – to love God and to serve people with everything that is in us. Anything less is a pale reflection of biblical Christianity. You may not be surprised to know that from time to time I am accused of having abandoned the true Gospel in favour of a social Gospel. I'm told that the job of the Church is simply to preach the Word!

Not ashamed of the Gospel

My response is simple – the Gospel was never just words! It has never been about shouting at society or at individuals. The Gospel is about words and deeds. It is about being like Jesus to the people we live with, work with and share this planet with. It's about having God's heart for people. Did Jesus only use words? Well ask the man born blind, the woman with the issue of blood, the people at the wedding at Cana, the thousands he fed before delivering the Sermon on the Mount. Ask Lazarus or Jairus or the widow of Nain if Jesus only used words.

Jesus not only spoke the truth – he was the truth. When he touched people, truth touched them. When he healed them, it was truth, grace and love that reached into their hearts and made a difference. We 'preach the word' every time we give someone a cup of cold water in Jesus name.

The Apostle Paul was not ashamed of the Gospel – and neither should we be. If we reduce the Gospel down to a three minute prayer after a twenty minute sermon in an hour long service once a week we have missed the point. The Gospel Paul was proud of was the message that God had reconciled the world to himself through His Son, the Lord Jesus. It was that the Kingdom of God had broken into the fallen world of first century Palestine and that it would never stop advancing. It was that sin had been dealt with, that God had made a way for people to have hope. It was that things do not have to be the same because God working through His Spirit and His people is making all things new. The Good News is that God is at work in the world and drawing people out of sin, pain, despair and hopelessness. That Gospel affects the way we view the world.

We must not be ashamed of speaking the truth. But we must not avoid being the truth as well. As you read this article today, what you do matters as much as what you say. How your church behaves is a true indication of what your church stands for. You do not need to find a new agenda for the church to be 'successful.' You need to go back to the biblical agenda – to act justly, love mercy and walk humbly before your God. Let those simple truths shape the way you live as an individual, as part of a family and as a member of the community.

It has never been 'just us' that mattered – we need to rediscover justice.

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Malcolm was born in Northern Ireland and studied theology at university. He has been actively involved in leading churches to engage in their communities for over a decade and currently leads a church on the Berkshire / Hampshire border.

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