

Progressive Social Justice and the Bible

By Jerry Collins

An online version of the Oxford English Dictionary supplies a general definition of social justice as “the objective of creating a fair and equal society in which each individual matters, their rights are recognized and protected, and decisions are made in ways that are fair and honest.” [Underline mine, <https://www.google.com/search?client=safari&rls=en&q=oxford+dictionary+social+justice&ie=UTF-8&oe=UTF-8>] Here we see kernels of a social justice perspective.

Namely, social justice promotes fairness and equity societally, each person’s rights are being protected, and those rights are preserved through fair and honest means. At first glance, these ideas underpinning social justice seem reasonable. But “how” this social justice outcome is created, “how” those rights are recognized and protected, and “how” decisions render a fair and honest process have become controversial.



There are a number of assumptions derived from this definition which contribute to this controversy. If the objective is to create a fair and equal society, then who is in charge of creating that? If the goal is a fair society determined in honest ways, what process ensures no bias, dishonesty, or injustice? If the purpose is recognized and protected rights, then what are these rights and by what mechanisms can they be guaranteed? This definition of social justice considers social inequality to be unjust. That would especially apply to the economic and social welfare of society. The remedy for a social justice idea of a fair and equal society is guaranteeing equality of outcome for all. The objective of social justice is to construct that society.

Pope Leo XIII Encyclical

Fairness and equality have not always been understood as essential for a just society. Near the turn of the twentieth century, Pope Leo XIII wrote an encyclical (a letter to the whole world) entitled “Rerum Novarum,” the new things, the new times. The encyclical was about economic and social matters related to the rise of the industrial revolution. The point of the encyclical was to confront a socialist attempt to create a just society based on equity.

The Pope viewed socialism as the major threat to a just society “to remedy these wrongs the socialists, working on the poor man’s envy of the rich, are striving to do away with private property, and contend that individual possessions should become the common property of all, to be administered by the State or by municipal bodies.” He noted “Socialists, therefore, by endeavoring to transfer the possessions of individuals to the community at large, strike at the interests of every wage-earner, since they would deprive him of the liberty of disposing of his wages, and thereby of all hope and possibility of increasing his resources and of bettering his condition in life.” [<https://www.papalencyclicals.net/leo13/113rerum.htm>]

The encyclical argued against socialist attempts to redistribute private property “the practice of all ages has consecrated the principle of private ownership, as being pre-eminently in conformity with human nature, and as conducing in the most unmistakable manner to the peace and tranquility of human existence.” The Pope’s encyclical established inequality as just “it must be first of all recognized that the condition of things inherent in human affairs must be borne with,

for it is impossible to reduce civil society to one dead level... There naturally exist among mankind manifold differences of the most important kind; people differ in capacity, skill, health, strength; and unequal fortune is a necessary result of unequal condition. Such inequality is far from being disadvantageous either to individuals or to the community”. According to Leo XIII the fact that people are unequal is a benefit for society. Equality is against nature. Our human abilities, capacities, and talents make us necessarily unequal in outcomes.

Progressive Takeover

Since the writing of the pope’s encyclical, there has been a gradual and a recently accelerated progressive takeover of the mission of social justice. Progressives today have once again radicalized the social justice mission to enforce and establish a just society based on equality through redistribution. This is the very idea the Pope’s encyclical confronted a hundred or so years earlier. William H. Young (Author: “Centering America: Resurrecting the Local Progressive Ideal”) defines this contemporary nature of social justice, “social justice has evolved generally to mean state redistribution of advantages and resources to disadvantaged groups to satisfy their rights to social and economic equality.” [<https://statementonsocialjustice.com/videos/defining-social-justice/>]

We can see the evolution of progressive social justice ideology when comparing Young’s contemporary definition of social justice with the Oxford Dictionary.

- The Oxford Dictionary says the objective of social justice is creating a fair and equal society. The progressive remedy is equity being the product of state redistribution.
- The Oxford Dictionary says a fair and equal society is made in ways fair and honest. Progressive thinking is that a fair and honest process requires redistribution of advantages and resources.
- The Oxford Dictionary says people’s rights matter. The progressive mission will enforce redistribution to serve the rights of disadvantaged groups that fit their criteria.
- The Oxford Dictionary says rights must be recognized and protected. Progressives demand that their disadvantaged groups have a right to social and economic equality.

The contemporary social justice vision requires a socialist means of control over society to ensure distributive justice. Progressive social justice is an artificial paradigm created for political purposes to advance progressives agenda of the social evolution of society. A further evaluation of this social justice ideology reveals its extreme social and political aspirations.

Progressive Social Justice Mission

The progressive social justice mission **identifies** disadvantaged groups as the target for social and economic equality. Their disadvantaged groups share a history of injustice and grievance to be exploited for advantage. Individuals may or may not have success, but that does not negate the issues inherent to the group as a whole. It is disadvantaged groups, not necessarily minorities, that create this priority. Women make up a greater voting block in America than men, but they are considered one of the disadvantaged groups included in the social justice agenda. This group privilege has transformed into identity politics “a political approach and analysis based on people prioritizing the concerns most relevant to their particular racial, religious, ethnic, sexual, cultural or other [group] identity.” [https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Identity_politics]

The progressive social justice mission **resolves** the disadvantaged groups particular grievance through a redistribution of power and resources to redress the injustice the group has experienced. It does not matter if a group is disadvantaged because of something inherent within that group, such as a lack of education or family breakdown. That type of accusation would be disparaged as victim-blaming. The answer is remedying the grievance of that particular group. Inequality is injustice for a disadvantaged group.

The progressive social justice mission **enforces** resource equity to disadvantaged groups. State authority redistributes resources from those who have apparently unjustly gained them to those who justly deserve them. Progressives believe social evolution requires decisive redistribution of resources along with the decision-making power to ensure social equity. They believe this extreme process will guarantee equal opportunity, equal access, and equal outcome. It does not matter how an individual may have acquired his or her social and economic advantage within a disadvantaged group. The injustice is based solely upon which group one belongs to.

Dr. Voddie Baucham illustrates this disparity of outcome within social justice groupings.

You can be a white person from Appalachia who was born with nothing and clawed yourself out. It doesn't matter. You are the privileged one. And if you stand shoulder to shoulder with the son or daughter of Colin Powell who grew up with privilege and power, the answer is whatever they have they deserve. And whatever you have, you did not. [This is so] because social justice looks at [the disparity of] the group [not individual].
[<https://statementonsocialjustice.com/videos/defining-social-justice/>]

The progressive social justice mission enforces social and economic equality through redistribution of advantages and resources to resolve selective disadvantaged groups grievances. This raises the question, "Is this progressive social justice mission our biblical responsibility?"

Social Justice Run Amok

"Faithful America" call themselves the largest online community of Christians putting faith into action for social justice. They understand the progressive social justice mission to be their biblical responsibility. Faithful America claims to be "organizing the faithful to... renew the church's prophetic role in building a more free and just society." On their webpage, they listed some of their progressive social justice successes. The first listed—they fought back against Hobby Lobby's religious objection to providing insurance coverage for contraception. With thousands of petition signatures, they were able to demonstrate Christian opposition to the religious freedom attack on birth control—a perceived threat to a select progressive social justice disadvantaged group, women, and their reproductive rights.

The second progressive social justice success listed was convincing Google to drop World Vision. World Vision had announced plans to stop discriminating against gays and lesbians, but reversed those plans due to the "furious outcry of the religious right." More than 17,000 Faithful America members called on Google to find new Christian partners that do not discriminate. World Vision's reversal was a perceived threat to another select progressive social justice disadvantaged group, gay, lesbian, and gay rights.

The remainder of the list included forcing MSNBC to drop the Family Research Council due to its perceived threat against bisexuals and transgender people, an additional select progressive social justice grievance group. The list included the defense of a pastor who they claimed was unjustly defrocked by the Pennsylvania United Methodist Church for officiating at the wedding of his gay son. The fact that he was fired was an injustice. According to Faithful America, the largest online community of Christians, a progressive social justice mission makes it a sin **not** to perform same-sex unions. [<https://act.faithfulamerica.org/signup/about-us/>]

The progressive social justice movement has selectively prioritized grievances for at least three disadvantaged groups—minority group equality, feminism and women’s rights, and LGBTQA+. All of these concerns fly increasingly under the flag of social justice. Faithful America has taken this progressive social justice agenda and embedded it within the Christian mission.

Faithful America believes the biblical mission is to provide insurance for contraception based on reproductive rights, advocate for social equality of bisexual and transgenderism, and officiate same sex marriages on behalf of gay rights. Starkly absent from their list is advocating for genuine biblical things like sharing the gospel, or pursuing discipleship, eternal rewards, spiritual maturity, repentance, and self-denial. **Actually, Christ followers who understand the progressive social justice mission will not advocate for nor equate this social justice movement with our biblical responsibility.**

The Bible and Righteous Justice

In contrast to the justice of the progressive social justice mission, is the pursuit of moral and righteous justice. Peter told us we are promised this justice someday *but according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells* (2 Peter 3:13). Righteous justice is that justice consistent with the character of God. The progressive social justice mission has no interest in and is incapable of applying God’s righteous justice.



Doing biblical justice was linked to loving mercy and walking humbly with God as essential virtues for Israel *does the Lord take delight in thousands of rams, in ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I present my firstborn for my rebellious acts, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?* (Micah 6-6-8). The progressive social justice mission has no interest in and is incapable of the application of biblical justice that loves mercy and walks humbly with God.

Israel’s Law legislated concern for those who were consistently at risk on the margins of Israelite society: the stranger, the slave, the orphan, and the widow in the land, *you shall do no injustice in court. You shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great, but in righteousness shall you judge your neighbor* (Leviticus 19:15; Psalm 82:3-4)). Righteous justice even included the most basic street economics *differing weights are an abomination to the Lord, and a false scale is not good* (Proverbs 20:23; Proverbs 31:8). Both leaders and individual Israelites were responsible to administer righteous justice to fellow citizens including all the disadvantaged within Israelite society. Social equality was not the goal. Forced redistribution was not the means. Loss of

property rights was not the outcome. The progressive social justice mission of enforced redistribution on behalf of their select disadvantaged groups is not consistent with the application of righteous justice in Israel.

Interestingly, Jesus may have illustrated a path by which we could respond to injustice. Hearing that his cousin, *John had been taken into custody Jesus withdrew into Galilee... and settled in Capernaum... in the region of Zebulun and Naphtali* (Matthew 4:12-13). What's with that? Jesus did not start a #freemycousinjohn campaign? No. Instead, Jesus took His disciples and *went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues* (the Word of God) *and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom* (evangelism and discipleship), *and healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness among the people* (doing all the good they could for everyone they could, whether it had anything to do with the Gospel or not [Matthew 4:23]). Absent is a social justice call to resolve John's unjust situation. If a progressive social justice mission was our biblical responsibility, here was an opportunity for Jesus to demonstrate that. However, Jesus did not imbed a progressive social justice mission into His ministry.

The early church advocated for righteous service especially for disadvantaged persons in the church *a complaint arose on the part of the Hellenistic (Christian) Jews against the native (Christian) Hebrews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving of food* (Acts 6:1). This was a legitimate grievance. It was resolved without compromising spiritual priorities over social ones *select from among you seven men of good reputation... whom we may put in charge of this task. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word* (Acts 6:3-4).

In Acts 2:45 *they were selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need* most likely for many of those who had traveled to Jerusalem for Passover. Constable says, "communal living was voluntary and temporary in the Jerusalem church. It was not forced socialism or communism. No other New Testament church practiced communal living to the extent that the Jerusalem Christians did. The New Testament nowhere commands communal living, and Acts does not refer to it after chapter five" [<https://www.StudyLight.org/commentaries/dcc/acts-2.html>]. There was no coercion. It was voluntary and the proceeds were given to those believers who had need, not taken from a subset of the wealthy to be given to a subset of the disadvantaged. Righteous justice did not require equality or equity. The church simply addressed righteous justice issues as part of a believer's biblical ministry to one another.

The Bible and Inequality

The progressive social justice movement considers inequality unjust, but the Bible does not. The Bible documents inequality as a virtuous concept. God showed His favoritism toward Israel when in her infancy God *passed by you and saw you squirming in your blood, I said to you while you were in your blood, 'Live!' Yes, I said to you while you were in your blood, 'Live!'* (Ezekiel 16:6). When Israel left Egypt, the Lord informed Israel that they were His chosen people as *a special possession above all the peoples who are on the face of the ground* (Deuteronomy 7:6). Indeed, *the whole earth and everything in it is the Lord's* (Deuteronomy 10:14), but Israel is His special possession. In



choosing the nation of Israel over other nations, God had made a distinction. He was discriminating between nations, not treating them as equals.

Jesus declared *do not worry then, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear for clothing?'* For the Gentiles eagerly seek all these things (Matthew 6:31-32). Paul testified *not that I speak from want, for I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am* (Philippians 4:11). The writer of Hebrews encouraged *being content with what you have; for He Himself has said, "I will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you"* (Hebrews 13:5). Social inequities are a natural outcome of life. Believers should be content with their economic and/or social status rather than campaigning to resolve social or economic inequality for themselves or the disadvantaged.

The Parable of the talents warns of the need to prepare for the coming Kingdom where some will have more dominion, authority, power, and wealth. Servants were given personal property by the master to invest *each according to his own ability* (Matthew 25:15). Eventually, their investment was accounted for when the master returned. Two invested well and were *put [you] in charge of many things* (v. 25). Another invested nothing and was called *a wicked, lazy servant* (v. 26). A progressive social justice warrior might have expected a redistribution of wealth when the master returned. Instead, the unprofitable servant's talent was taken from him and given to the one who had ten (v. 28).

Jesus' concluding statement about reward and service in His Kingdom seems unjust. *For to everyone who has, more will be given, and he will have abundance. But to the one who does not have, even what he has will be taken from him* (v. 29). There will be inequality in God's Kingdom, or according to Pope Leo XIII "there naturally exist among mankind manifold differences of the most important kind; people differ in capacity, skill, health, strength; and unequal fortune is a necessary result of unequal condition." Equal opportunity and equal access does not guarantee equal outcome. That depended upon how each servant invested.

It is also likely that there will be inequality in heaven. Praise and honor at the Judgment Seat of Christ reveals the eternal significance of rewards *each man's work will become evident; for the day will show it because it is to be revealed with fire, and the fire itself will test the quality of each man's work. If any man's work which he has built on it remains, he will receive a reward* (1 Corinthians 3:15-16; cp. 2 Corinthians 5:9-10). The specific terminology employed in Matthew 6:19-21, *treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys*; in 1 Corinthians 9:25, *imperishable, incorruptible, immortal*; and in 1 Peter 5:4, *unfading*, to describe future rewards and promised crowns, is testimony to their eternal nature. There will be eternal distinctions.

The Bible and Individuals

The social justice mission prioritizes disadvantaged groups, but the Bible elevates the individual to a special status. God *had regard for Abel and for his offering; but for Cain and for his offering He had no regard* (Genesis 4:4). *The Lord was sorry that He had made man on the earth*, but it was *Noah [who] found favor in the eyes of the Lord* (Genesis 6:8). Abraham left his homeland based on God's promise "*To your descendants I will give this land*" (Genesis 12:7). From the beginning, the entire plan of God was founded upon a string of individuals who stood out to God, and were elevated to special roles in the outworking of God's plan.

Jesus had many encounters with individuals throughout His ministry. He personally chose His Disciples *He saw Simon and Andrew, the brother of Simon, casting a net in the sea; for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, "Follow Me"* (Mark 1:16). Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John recorded more than forty encounters between Jesus and various individuals. In nine cases, Jesus initiated the conversations like that of the Samaritan woman (John 4:7-42) and a crippled beggar (John 5:1-15).

In twenty-five instances, another party began the conversation, along with Jesus' response including the rich young ruler (Matthew 19:16-30), and a hemorrhaging woman (Mark 5:24-34). Other conversations were triggered by third parties, such as the tax collectors and other sinners invited to a party by Matthew (Matthew 9:9-13). Many conversations happened in the workplace such as with James and John (Matthew 4:21-22). Several others took place in homes, as at Zacchaeus' house (Luke 19:1-10). [<https://bible.org/illustration/how-jesus-interacted-people>]

Jesus took the initiative with persons. He responded to individuals. He left room in His schedule for interruptions by friends, neighbors, and strangers wanting His assistance. Jesus usually met people on their own turf. He was interested in establishing common ground to facilitate further conversation and understanding. A progressive social justice mission has no interest in prioritizing these types of individual focus over against their group mentality. Yet, this is what a biblical ministry looks like. This is the substance of our biblical mission.

The church is called God's household *I write so that you will know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth* (1 Timothy 3:15). In a household, everybody, each individual, has a place at the table. The church as a collection of individuals, is networked together as *fellow citizens with the saints*, where each individual believer is a member of *God's household*. The church is not a community where individuals are exploited and displaced on behalf of a progressive social and economic equality for select disadvantaged groups.

The church, like a body *is one and yet has many members, and all the members of the body, though they are many, are one body, so also is Christ* (1 Corinthians 12:12). The church is a group of persons each one with a place and role in serving the interests of the entire body. This description points to the preservation of individuals, who are part of a collection of persons, who make up the church. According to a progressive social justice mission the select disadvantaged group (community) has priority. The individual is expendable.

Conclusion

Adapting the term "social justice" to describe our biblical responsibility is not appropriate. That term is understood by everyone else in a non-biblical manner. To use the term, we have to redefine it in ways not used in the Oxford Dictionary, and publicly by schools and universities, social institutions, and government agencies. It is toxic terminology associated with groups that have a radical view of the social evolution of society.

The mission of progressive social justice diverts attention away from eternal realities. It turns hearts and minds from things above to things on this earth. It obscures the priority to move on to

spiritual maturity by means of spiritual growth with a goal to pursue social equality through forced redistribution of earthly wealth and resources. Its focus on power to engineer progressive social equality is juxtaposed to the biblical ethic of humility, and service to one another.

Believers are to do good to all people, our material resources and goods made readily available to any who may be victimized, marginalized, or destitute within our sphere of influence (Luke 10:36-37; Galatians 6:9-10; Hebrews 13:2-3). However, this biblical service is to be done especially on behalf of believers, to whom we are commanded to give, love, and serve (James 2:15-17; 1 John 3:15-17; 2 Corinthians 8:1-5). The elimination of personal private property, or comprehensive economic and social equality was never the goal.

The teaching of the New Testament is that the church is to have a laser-like focus on the mission the Lord has given us – to make disciples whose lives bring glory of God. *Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you* (Matthew 28:19-20). **Christ followers who understand the progressive social justice mission will not advocate for nor equate this social justice movement with our biblical responsibility.**