**Social Justice and the Gospel: Divided We Cannot Stand**

By Kenneth Young Ph.D.

Questions around social justice and its relationship to the gospel have been an issue in the Evangelical church community since the earliest founders of Evangelicalism. Early Evangelical Christians did not use the term social justice, yet some can be seen as having a sentiment for social justice in their thinking while it remained absent from the theological ethics. Why has social injustice so dominated Evangelical ethics? Are there theological features imbedded in Evangelical theology allowing complicity with social injustice? Is the gospel incompatible with social justice or does an intersection exist between social justice and gospel which can be argued from the biblical text. Many Evangelicals would agree with the idea of an intersection between social justice and the gospel arguing social justice as a by-produce of the community or individual who has been transformed by the gospel. My contention is that the good news is broader than the resolution of individual sins or the by-produce of regeneration and that the gospel requires justice to be established in every area of civil society.

**A SHORT HISTORICAL REVIEW**

**Cotton Mather 1663 -1728**

In an essay about the Christianizing of enslaved Africans, Cotton Mather speaks with an attitude of compassion. His language suggests a certain sentiment for social justice:

*If I can have the Labour of the Slave, that’s all I care for. Let his Soul go and be damn’d for all time! Would not every Christian say this were language for the mouth of a Devil, rather than for the mouth of a Christian! Would not every Christian cry out, let him not be call’d a master, but a monster that shall speak.[[1]](#endnote-1)*

One cannot treat their slaves as if the only thing they are good for is service to their masters. There certainly should be justice for their souls and I would assume their lives if this type of language was unacceptable. Later in his essay we can observe the duplicity in his thinking. His worldview seems conflicted. On the one hand in this world these people can be treated as property abject chattel on the other hand offered the blesses of God’s gracious inheritance.

*Well, what shall I do, to make this poor creature happy? What shall I do, that this poor creature may have cause, to bless God forever, for falling into my Hands! The very First Thought which will arise in a Mind thus disposed, will form a Resolution, to get these poor Negroes well instructed in the things of their Everlasting Peace; It cannot be otherwise! The state of your Negroes in this world, must be low, and mean, and abject; a state of servitude. No great things in this world, can be done for them. Something then, let there be done, towards their welfare in the world to come.[[2]](#endnote-2)*

In Mather we can see the roots of Evangelical complicity with social injustice. What about Mather’s theology informs him to hold this worldview?

**Jonathan Edwards 1703 - 1757**

Edwards owned slaves and allowed slave membership in his church while treating blacks and whites as spiritual equals but not socially. There is the case where Benjamin Doolittle, an Arminian and a slave owner who was defended by Edwards against Doolittle’s congregation which denounced him for, among other things, his slaveholding practice. Again, in Edwards, there is this sentiment for spiritual justice, but he supported slavery and the social ethic that informed it.

**J. Gretchen Machen 1881-1937**

J. Gretchen Machen was one of the champions of Evangelical conservativism. Standing against the invasion of liberalism in the 1920’s is an important part of his legacy. After his expulsion from Princeton his legacy includes the founding of Westminster Seminary a flagship voice for conservative Evangelicalism. Machen made it clear that he believed the gospel to exclude social justice. “You cannot expect from a true Christian church an official pronouncement upon the political and social questions of the day. Its weapons against evil are spiritual not carnal.”

Two additional memorable comments attach themselves to Machen’s legacy. The first simply revealing the racism in his heart. In a letter to his mother while a student at Princeton he writes: *“…any time a room is vacant [the colored man] may move over here. If I am to make any objection, now is the time to make it. Of course, if he came over here I could simply move out. It would be a big sacrifice to me.”[[3]](#endnote-3)*The second comment reveals Machen’s views concerning white supremacy and his desired to protect white privilege.

*[…]it always makes me intensely angry to hear people talking glibly about equal civil rights of negroes when in many parts of the South those equal rights would mean that every legislator and every judge would be a savage of a type and the white men would be more unsafe in parts of this country than in the most parts of the world where at least the protection of his home government is to some extent with him.[[4]](#endnote-4)*

Machen voices his desire to maintain white men’s grasp on supremacy.

**John MacArthur 1939 to current**

John MacArthur is a current leader leading the charge against social justice and the gospel who makes his position clear:

*Furthermore, every attempt to widen the scope of the gospel will ultimately put the gospel so far out of focus that its actual message will be lost. The message of social justice diverts attention from Christ and the cross. It turns our hearts and minds from things above to things on this earth.[[5]](#endnote-5)*

MacArthur’s legacy is being established as well as other Evangelical Christian leaders with the writing of a position paper on social justice embedded in the Dallas Statement on Social. This statement offers the framework for an Evangelical view that disparages social justice. Like Mather, and Machen, MacArthur ‘s statement supports issues associated with White Supremacy.

**A BIBLICAL ARGUMENT FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE**



**A definition for social justice**

A simplistic description would be that social justice requires all personal, collective, and legal relationships within the Christian body politic reflect the justice[[6]](#endnote-6), character, design and purpose of God.

**Justice in the creation**

At the end of each creation period in the Genesis 1 God makes the pronouncement “it was good” *tov[[7]](#endnote-7)* meaning created things were functioning in the exact way God wanted and designed them to function. In verse 28 God commanded Adam and Eve to extend the creation by filling the earth with the image of God. They were also commanded to establish a global civil society, the city of God, by subduing the earth and all its resources for their use. This city would be subsequently judged by God as good reflecting the justice and character of God.

In Genesis 2:24-25 Adam and Eve represent humanity reflecting justice socially. The two were both naked meaning they were both transparent and vulnerable before each other without the presence of shame. It was in chapter 3 after man’s rebellion against God’s prohibition that social injustice enters the human experience. In verse 12 Adam exploits Eve by “throwing her under the bus” blaming her for their predicament with God. Social injustice has now been introduced. In 3:24 with their relationship to the Father as children destroyed, they are both thrown out of the garden. In 4:12 after social injustice is manifest in the conflict between Cain and Able. God identifies Cain with the compensatory identity as fugitive, and wanderer[[8]](#endnote-8). The story continues, cities are built but now with the intention to glorify God is replaced with the intention to glorify themselves. The three sons of Noah are identified in Genesis 10 with various compensatory[[9]](#endnote-9) identities all contending for power, control, and a desire to demonstrate their superiority over the other. Social injustice is now a dominate force in all human interaction. The gospel is introduced in Genesis 12 as the solution through Abraham’s lineage for the pervasiveness of individual and collective injustice dominating the world.

**The introduction of the gospel promise**

The promise God made to Abraham was twofold. First God promised to use Abraham to establish a great nation, the global civil society which He had commanded Adam to establish. Second, the promise stated that God would populate this great city by redeeming people form every ethnic group on the earth through the atonement provided by Abraham’s son. The city designed and built by God (Hebrews 11:10) would be pronounced “good” with a body politic dominated by shalom, justice and righteousness.

Like the civilizations before him Noah attempted to build a city and a tower represented a distorted response to God’s mandate to Adam to built a city. But now it wasto *build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth.”*Noah did not want to fill the earth and he did not want to glorify God. It was in this context that God called Abraham and announced the “good new” gospel.

The first mention of the gospel is in Genesis 12:3 with God’s promise to Abraham to use him to establish a justice society: *And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.****3****I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse.* The second part of the promise was of a son who would provide individual atonement for sin:*in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”* Paul summarized the promise quoting Genesis 12:3 in Galatians 3:8,*8 the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justifythe Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, “In you shall all the nations be blessed.” 9So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.* From this point on Abraham expected to be blessed with a male child born from his own loins.

**Confirmation of the gospel promise**

Abraham confronts God about the fulfilment of the promise made to him by reminded God in Genesis 15:3 that he had no offspring. God’s response to Abraham affirms both the soteriological point of view with the seed representing the Christ proceeding from Abraham’s loins and the global civil society represented by the many stars. This represented the eschatological point of view.

***2****But Abram said, “O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue[*[*n*](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Genesis+10-20&version=ESV#fen-ESV-363n)*] childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?”****3****And Abram said, “Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir.”****4****And behold, the word of the Lord came to him: “This man shall not be your heir; your very own son[*[*o*](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Genesis+10-20&version=ESV#fen-ESV-365o)*] shall be your heir.”****5****And he brought him outside and said, “Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.”****6****And he believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness.*

Abraham believed God and God counted him as righteousness. The Apostle Paul uses the phrase “Abraham believed, and it was counted as righteousness” as the foundation for teaching justification by faith. But what was the substance of the gospel affirmation to Abraham? What did Abraham believe in Genesism15:4-5 resulting in justification? Abraham believed both aspects of the promise. He expected his seed, which would be a blessing to all ethnic groups on the earth to address the shalom promise as well as justice promise about a great nation. The gospel announcement included individual justification and global social justice.

**The confirmation of Abraham’s expectations**

Abraham’s soteriological and eschatological expectations were affirmed by the Hebrew writer. Hebrews 11:9-12 records Abraham life of faith motivated by the promise of a city built and designed by God (characterized by the justice of God). Abraham’s emphasis, as recorded by the writer of Hebrews, was on the city. Abraham’s faith in a son raised from the dead and Sarah’s power to conceive at an older age takes place later in the passage.

***8****By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going.****9****By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise.****10****For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.****11****By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised.****12****Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born descendants as many as the stars of heaven and as many as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.*



Hebrews 11:17-18 Abraham believed that God could raise his son from the dead. This is a direct reference to the resurrection of the Christ the seed however the city is given priority in Abraham’s thinking.

***17****By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son,****18****of whom it was said, “Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.”****19****He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back.*

Galatians 3:28-29 shows both soteriological and eschatological seeds present. “If you are of Christ,” first seed, “then you are of Abraham’s offspring” the second seed.

**Establishing shalom, justice, and righteousness**

The definition for the word justice is *“rule, govern, referring to all functions of government; including legislative, executive and judicial functions and functionaries in government…both the verb and the noun include all of these functions.”[[10]](#endnote-10)* To put this is common language: justice is the management of all relationships in the body politic in ways which are consistent with the character of God.

Isaiah 9:6-7 talks about the Messianic establishment of justice and righteousness:

**6**For to us a child is born,  
      to us a son is given;  
 and the government shall be upon his shoulder,  
      and his name shall be called  
 Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,  
      Everlasting Father, Prince of **Peace**.  
 **7**Of the increase of his government and of **peace**  
     there will be no end,  
 on the throne of David and over his kingdom,  
      to establish it and to uphold it  
 with **justice** and with **righteousness**  
     from this time forth and forevermore.

It will be a government where every legislative, executive, and judicial function reflects the character of God. The shalom (peace) lost with Adam’s sin will be reestablished.

Being made into a great nation represents Abrahams eschatological expectation. Jesus expressed the same expectations in Luke 4:12-21:

16 and he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. And as was his custom, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and he stood up to read. **17**And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written,

18“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
     because he has anointed me  
     to proclaim good news to the poor.  
 He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives  
     and recovering of sight to the blind,  
     to set at liberty those who are oppressed,  
 19to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.



**20** and he rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. **21**And he began to say to them, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

Jesus’ announcement in the synagogue declared his anointing by God to preach the good news. It affirmed his empowerment by the Holy Spirit to accomplish his appointed ministry and it declared the beginning of the process to bring shalom peace to a needy humanity.

Luke 4:12-17 talks about Jesus’ ministry addressing issues related to shalom. Sin destroyed the shalom existing at the time of creation. It also introduced disharmony into the structures of creation. Adam is informed by God that his sin had resulted in the ground being cursed. The ground will now produce thorns and thistles with the production of bread an arduous task. Extortion, blame shifting and lying was introduced into human relationships. Personal internal disharmony was introduced as fear and shame internalized. The day they ate of the fruit they did die. The harmonious relationship with God was broken. Every aspect of the creation itself was distorted by Adam’s sin. Luke references Jesus’ ministry as the restoration of shalom. The good news then is God’s restoration of shalom to the created order. Including the damage done to humanities individual and collection relationship with each other.

The source for Luke’s quote of Jesus is both Isaiah 42:1-9 and 61:1-4. The Luke passage focuses primarily on issues related to shalom. An important addition to Luke is the part of Jesus’ restoration ministry not found directly in the Luke quote but prominent in the Isaiah passages are issues related to justice. Justice will be establishment by Jesus to the nations and in the earth:

*42 Behold my servant, whom I uphold,  
     my chosen, in whom my soul delights;  
 I have put my Spirit upon him;  
     he will bring forth justice to the nations.  
 2He will not cry aloud or lift up his voice,  
     or make it heard in the street;  
 3a bruised reed he will not break,  
     and a faintly burning wick he will not quench;  
     he will faithfully bring forth justice.  
 4He will not grow faint or be discouraged  
     till he has established justice in the earth;  
     and the coastlands wait for his law.*

There is an interested connection here to American civil society. Did Jefferson have these ideas in mind when he penned the words for the American experiment:

*We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.--That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed,*

Jefferson did not get this wording from an exposition of the Biblical text. But if he had exposited the biblical text concerning justice this is the wording he would have employed. It is the responsibility of the government to manage the relationships in the body politic. This links biblical thinking to the idea of social justice even in secular American civil society. Justice requires every relationship in a civil society, human to human and government to human, reflect the character of God. This is the good news announced and promised by God. It is His intention to be faithful to this covenant promise made with Abraham.

**Conclusion**

The gospel announcement includes both a message for individual salvation and a plan for global restorative social justice. Rebellion against God’s will, sin, is to stop. In addition to the eradication of sin there is a required restoration meaning the consequence of sin is to be reversed. Broken and unjust systems are to change. Economic practices, political policies, medical and educational systems should reflect the character of God. Existential damage done to individuals and family systems are to be healed. The restoration plan cannot be viewed simply through a soteriological lens. The reason Evangelicals have a hard time getting their minds around social justice is because they have a simplistic, individualistic and one dimension understanding of sin. An examination of three Hebrew terms in Isaiah 9:6-7 (peace, justice and righteousness) will help us understand the wholistic nature of sin. At the end of each creation period the creation is pronounces to be good (tov). The meaning here suggests that the restored humanity, the new Adam, and the city he occupies should be in complete synergy with God. Synergy has been lost and it should be restored as we the body of Christ pick up the task given to Adam and Eve in the garden pass to Abraham and his son Jesus Christ.

**Additional theological contributions from post-reformation protestant tradition making it difficult for us to think biblical about social justice.**

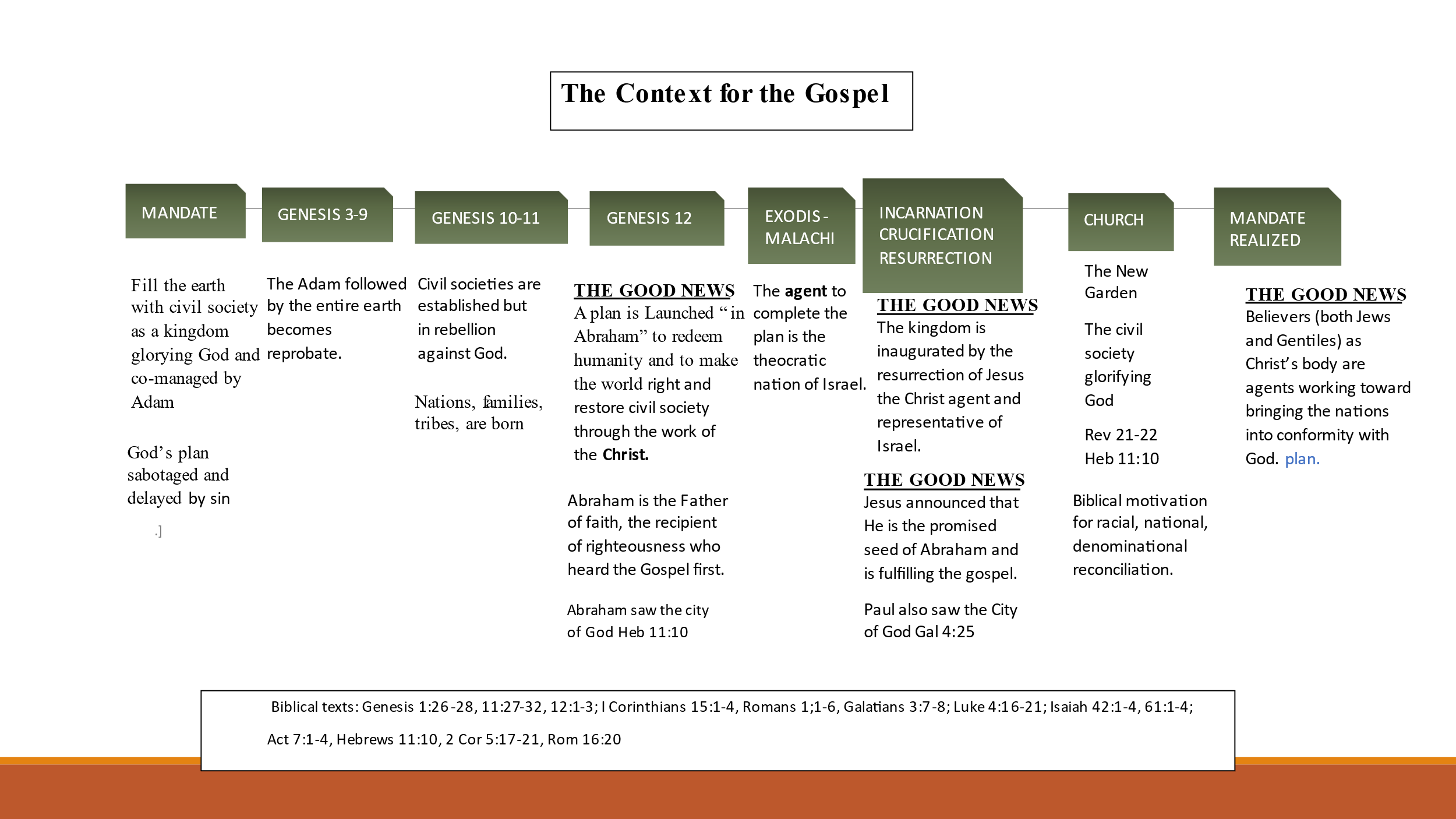
*Elements commonly found in our most popular biblical theologies*

Our two most common biblical theologies are dispensationalism and covenant theology. Both hermeneutical systems employ a soteriological lens supported by eschatology. The soteriological lens views God overall plan to be one of evangelism. In the end all believers go to heaven. Examing a biblical storyline through a sociological lens chart views (see appendix #1) God’s vision of things starting with the fall in Genesis 3 and ending with the cross. One problem with this lens as the primary lens is that it’s like reading a 10-chapter book starting with chapter 2 and ending with chapter 9. At the end you will miss a great part of the author’s plot. A second problem with the soteriological lens as primary is the individualistic and man centered character of the plan. Individualism can easily lead to a lack of empathy. John Stott was a well respected Evangelical missiologist illustrated that point. Stott summarizes three common perspectives on the relationship between the gospel and social action this way:

*First, some regard social action as a means to evangelism. In this case evangelism and the winning of converts are the primary ends in view, but social action is a useful preliminary, an effective means to these ends… A second way of relating evangelism and social action is better. It regards social action not as a means to evangelism but as a manifestation of evangelism, or at least of the gospel that is being proclaimed. In this case philanthropy is not attached to evangelism rather artificially from the outside, but grows out of it as its natural expression. One might almost say that social action becomes the “sacrament” of evangelism, for it makes the message significantly visible… This brings me to the third way of stating the relation between evangelism and social action, which I believe to be the truly Christian one, namely, that social action is a partner of evangelism…“If any one has the world’s goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God’s love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or speech but in deed and in truth” (1 John 3:17-18). Here love in action springs from a twofold situation, first “seeing” a brother in need and secondly “having” the wherewithal to meet the need.[[11]](#endnote-11)*

Stott understanding of social action is that it is *not a priority*, *it is not necessary*, and *it is not a concern*. So naturally social justice is not viewed as part of the gospel.

An eschatological lens viewed as primary with the soteriological material in scripture supporting God’s eschatological plan seems more consistent with the greater content of scripture (again see chart #1). The lens starts with God mandate for a community and ends with the establishing of the city of God. The city of God is the community where heaven and earth meet and God dwelling with His people. This biblical worldview is looking at the entire biblical storyline where community and an empathic concern for justice in the community is easily seen in scripture. Without community social justice is not a part of the good news. But if community is God’s intended goal social justice is a requirement.



Chart#1

1. Mather, Cotton and Royster, Paul , editor, "The Negro Christianized. An Essay to Excite and Assist that Good Work, the Instruction of Negro-Servants in Christianity (1706)" (1706). Electronic Texts in American Studies. Paper [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. “Machen to Mother.” Received by Timothy Isaiah Cho from the Archives of Montgomery Library at Westminster Theological Seminary, 5 October 1913. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. “Machen to Mother.” Received by Timothy Isaiah Cho from the Archives of Montgomery Library at Westminster Theological Seminary, 5 October 1913. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. John MacArthur. The Injustice of Social Justice September 2018 [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament page 948-49. Justice refers to rule and governing of all functions legislative, executive and judicial functions and the functionaries in government; The attribute of justice inall correct personal civil administration of is emphasized. This justice is primarily an attribute of God, all true mishpat finding its course in God himself and therefore carrying with it his demand. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Tov is from the Hebrew word for "good", but with a fuller intent which implies something which fulfills the purpose for which it was created. [What does tov mean? (definitions.net)](https://www.definitions.net/definition/tov) Tov it was good;

   tov means to function in the way a thing was designed to function. Hebrew thought includes another element that cannot be accomplished by simply exercising good will on behalf of an enemy. Heschel states it beautifully: “Man cannot be good unless he strives to be holy.”[[1]](https://skipmoen.com/2016/05/satisfaction/" \l "_ftn1) Doing good is not simply social justice. It is not merely charity. Doing good in Hebrew means striving for holiness, and we cannot fulfill this commandment of the Messiah without attaching our hearts to the heart of the Father. Benevolence alone is not enough. You and I must strive to exhibit the holiness of God before our enemies. Walking through the valley of the shadow of death doesn’t mean escaping. Satisfaction by Skip Moen, Ph.D.May 30, 2016; [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Fugitive and wanders have no place to call home. They have not sense of identity. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Contemporary identities are identities developed by humanity in compensation for lost identity as children. All compensatory identities are vulnerable by Satan or the world system. The only identity not vulnerable is our identity in Christ.

   R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., Bruce K. Waltke. Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament, Moody Press, Chicago, 1980, p 948.

   Stott, John; J H Wright, Christopher. Christian Mission in the Modern World (p. 27). IVP. Kindle Edition.

   . [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)