

THE MAKING OF A JUSTICE AGENDA

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Text: Luke 4:14–21

Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

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Nearly four years ago, several of the most popular evangelical pastors and theologians put out what they called “The Statement on Social Justice and the Gospel,” the purpose of which was to address what they described as the “somewhat nebulous rubric of concern for ‘social justice.’” They were concerned that the advocacy for social justice was a stalking horse for a liberal or socialist policy agenda. Their statement overflowed with biblical citations and references in their discussion of scripture, justice, God’s law, sin, culture, and racism/ethnicity. But what was so shocking about the statement is that it made no reference to or citation of this passage in Luke. The statement made no reference to Jesus’ reading of this Isaiah passage in his hometown synagogue and his articulation of these words as the mission to which he has been empowered to undertake. There was no attempt at all to wrestle with arguably the clearest articulation of Jesus’ purpose and ministry in the Gospels. Nor was there at least an alternative interpretation of the actual text as a way to challenge what the signatories considered to be an outsized focus on social justice.

Soon after the release of the statement, the signatories to it fanned out for interviews and submitted opinion pieces describing their reservations about and disagreements with the current political and religious focus on social justice. It was in those responses that I now understand why anyone who opposes a political or public policy focus on social justice would want to avoid this text. It is a dangerous text! It is a simple, easily comprehended agenda for addressing the social, political, and economic conditions of the most vulnerable people. And it proposes not just attention to them, but a wholesale reversal of their condition and the systems and structures that created them. Both in Jesus’ context and in ours if we make this agenda concrete, if we operationalize it for our nation, bringing good news to the poor, proclaiming release to the captives, helping people recover the activity of their limbs and senses, letting the oppressed go free, and forgiving people’s debts, we will upend and alter the very course of the culture and economy as we know it. This is dangerous agenda for the empire.

And for religious institutions, this is a particularly dangerous text because the promised release and rescue from bondage and captivity in all its forms goes beyond the church’s traditional focus on

deliverance from personal sin. The promised rescue is also physical and material. That Jesus articulates liberation not just for the intangible soul but also for the sick, violated, oppressed, imprisoned, and exploited body means that this justice agenda does not care at all about the building and maintaining the institutions of religion. This focus is on the real condition of real human beings. This is not a church agenda. This is not an institutional agenda. This is a justice agenda, a prophetic oracle from God, targeted toward the most vulnerable. Now some may object that we have been using this passage as a proof-text for a political agenda. I plead innocent of that charge because the writer of the Gospel of Luke intentionally placed in Jesus' mouth Isaiah's prophetic oracle of God's promise not only to return Israel from exile, but also a promise for her full restoration, wholeness, and liberation, body and soul.

But more than that, Luke doesn't offer this account of Jesus' bringing good news to the poor and proclaiming release to the captives for dramatic, literary flourish. It is Jesus' agenda. When John the Baptist sends his disciples to inquire of Jesus if he is serious, if the agenda is real, if Jesus is the one who is to come, or are they to wait for another, Jesus gives a progress report on his agenda: "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them" (Luke 7:22). Jesus has a justice agenda, and his mission and ministry are singularly focused on it just as he proclaimed it would be when he spoke in his hometown synagogue.

Of all the passages of the Hebrew Bible that Luke could have had Jesus read, why this passage? Why this intentional reference to the prophetic word of restoration, wholeness, and liberation to an exiled people? Could it be the context into which Jesus ministers? When Jesus rose to read the scroll, he was speaking into a world of widespread poverty. There was no good news for the poor; there was no apparent way out of their bondage. Living at subsistence; overburdened and indebted because of compulsory rents, taxes, and tributes; land and produce appropriated at the whim of the powerful; their lives were devoid of hope, newness, and possibility. There was no middle class and no social supports for the sick, destitute, or imprisoned. The vast majority of the population was bound culturally, religiously, politically, and economically. As one theologian has so eloquently talked about the biblical human predicament into which God speaks, the people were in "a situation of hopelessness and homelessness, a sense of impotence about being able to change circumstance, and a bewilderment about how to be fully human."¹ Empowered by the Spirit and anointed by God, Jesus preaches good news to the poor; proclaims freedom from social, political, religious, and economic bondage; and offers the forgiveness of debts.

This is a dangerous text in a satisfied, imperial world, and unfortunately, the church has aided and abetted the empire in robbing this word of its danger and radicality. It should offend us, disrupt us, interrupt us, disorient us, and convict us as long as poverty, oppression, domination, and exploitation remain so consistent and expected and common. There is no good news for the most vulnerable among us as long as the world luxuriates in wealth and abundance untold while we do the bare minimum to relieve poverty, sickness, and bondage of every kind. Before the pandemic hit, up to 11 million people were on the brink of homelessness, and more than 87 million people in the nation are uninsured or underinsured.² The United States has the highest prisoner rate in the world, with roughly 2.12 million people incarcerated.³ Over 550,000 people in local jails today have not been convicted; many of those are in jail because they are too

¹Walter Brueggemann, *The Word Militant* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 5.

²Forward Focus Fact Sheets: "Healthcare" and "Housing and Homelessness," *Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival*, <https://www.poorpeoplescampaign.org/resource/factsheets/> (accessed January 28, 2022).

³"Countries with the largest number of prisoners per 100,000 of the national population, as of May 2021," *Statista*, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/262962/countries-with-the-most-prisoners-per-100-000-inhabitants/> (accessed January 28, 2022).

poor to make bail and so are being held before trial.⁴ The average American is saddled with more than \$90,000 in debt; the total student loan debt load is \$1.7 trillion.⁵ Millions of people languish in social, religious, and economic bondage. Do we have a word for them? What is the good news to them? Can we proclaim this justice agenda for them?

In modern politics and in our current public policy debates, we are told that bringing good news to the poor, proclaiming release to the captives, helping people recover the activity of their faculties, letting the oppressed go free, and forgiving people's debts are way too complicated to achieve or way too expensive to attempt. I have seen the condescension with which pundits and politicians and their policy specialists look upon the advocates of an agenda that goes this deep and this far in creating a just and livable condition for vulnerable people. We live in a time when people are largely unmoved by the suffering of others, especially if they do not look like them or if they are considered the other because of race, sex, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity. We have come to accept as normal and acceptable a federal policy focus that privileges corporate profits and military buildups over the human needs of the most vulnerable citizens.

We can debate what the agenda should be called. We can be concerned about the phrase "social justice" losing its meaning because of overuse and sloganeering. We should always be careful to never confuse the political programs of political parties and ideological movements with the good news of Jesus Christ. But if we gather as the church in the name of Jesus, then we cannot ignore the justice agenda Jesus, empowered by the Holy Spirit and anointed by God, proclaimed to the poor, the captive, the bound, and the indebted. But we, too, have been empowered and anointed because of the gift of God's spirit on us. What do we do with it? We use our voices, our gifts, our witness, and our discipleship to make real Jesus' assurance at the end of his proclamation in the synagogue: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." May it be so.

⁴Wendy Sawyer and Peter Wagner, "Mass Incarceration: The Whole Pie 2020," *Prison Policy Initiative*, March 24, 2020, <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/pie2020.html> (accessed January 28, 2022).

⁵Bill Fay, "Demographics of Debt," *Debt.org*, October 19, 2021, <https://www.debt.org/faqs/americans-in-debt/demographics/> (accessed January 28, 2022).