

Justice – World Pentecostal Conference August 2013

It never occurred to me that my Pentecostal church, parents and friends didn't care about justice. Years into ministry, while resisting the call for social justice by my theologically liberal friends, did I realize that I lived with an inherent bias towards those who called for social justice.

Let my auto biography frame my conversation this morning, a journey of 71 years, lived as a son of a Pentecostal minister, ordained for some 45 years, yet serving in ministry within institutions whose mandate and community overlapped and complemented the Canadian and now international Pentecostal world.

We lived in the prairie region of Canada, a marginal, struggling and mostly a farm-based church. Pastors and leaders had little formal education. Roman Catholics found us curious and sometimes bothersome. The main line Protestants viewed us as fringe and other Evangelicals were confused and sometimes discourteous. Caught up in the epi center of the Latter Rain Movement, my father as bishop of our region, sought to bring the broken pieces together.

As well, our region was unique in that it was the first social democratic government in the western world. Based on early 20th century socialism, a Baptist minister not only founded this left of center provincial government, but also once in power, enacted the first universal medical plan in North America.

I tell you this because our Pentecostal community lived within a social democratic government, which based its view of social policy on Christ's call to help and care for each other.

At the same time, the liberal leaning mainline Protestants were embracing a Gospel, which in our view was avoiding the sin component in the human heart. They viewed the role of the Gospel was to wrestle with systemic policies, institutions and corporations which were the reason, they assessed was responsible for social inequality.

You can see the two fronts we confronted. The Premier of our Province was Baptist, pushing for social justice in government policies, pioneering pensions plans and unemployment insurance. Linked with him was the reworked language of liberally inclined Protestants who seemed to preach a Gospel in which social justice was the reigning theme rather than salvation from sin.

"Justice" modified by "social," became "social justice," a code word for liberal theology, socialistic theories and policies, a move so fundamentally at cross purposes to what we saw as the Gospel.

Yet in our church, care for those in need filled our agendas and dipped into our offerings. Congregations of modest income earners, with few in the professions and

certainly outside of circles of influence, the instinct to help those facing tough times was alive and well.

So why has this central biblical theme and mandate been so long in raising itself within the life and teaching or preaching of many of our churches?

Our aversion for the word – justice – and our historical disinterest in its implications rises out of four essential drivers of theology, preaching, culture and opinion.

1. As a revival movement, preaching of and experiencing inner holiness drove our theology. In brief, our soteriology – our understanding of sin and salvation – was malformed. We got half of it right. However we divided life into two: on one side was God, salvation, church, holiness, and heaven. On the other side was the world, works, society, worldliness and life on earth. We failed to see that all of life is the Lord's. Righteousness/holiness was for us the call of Christ. This was what the work of the Spirit did. To see the wideness of God's concern, to include all of the world in his domain was beyond the borders of our theological framework.

2. Preaching centered around the anointing of the Spirit to bring about transformation, persuading hearers to give the totality of their lives in service and to offer their bodies as instruments of righteousness. The power of the moment, the intensity of the preacher, the expectations of the congregation moved to bring about change in that moment. The wider exigencies of social need had little place in that moment and service.

3. Our culture was shaped by a church in which the actual meeting, the revival atmosphere drove towards ecstatic utterance, the visible evidence of the Spirit at work, the power gifts in operation, healing and provision of finance by the attending oversight of the Spirit. Bible study, prayer meetings, witness events ruled our agenda. In the early days if not despised by our evangelical brothers and sisters, we were often ignored, such exclusion simply intensified our sense of being a peculiar people, called out in the last days to be the carrier of his Holy Ghost power. We built our own camp meetings. Raised our own Bible schools. Founded our own mission societies. Our culture was confined, and within that we were comfortable. Issues outside of that were unimportant, and certainly wider societal issues were simply someone else's business.

4. A fourth shaper of our lack of concern for issues of justice was that – and here I speak of what I know best in Canada and the USA – the ruling assumption in society was that those who ruled, set standards, taught, led and created, did so on the basis that a Christian society, based on biblical values was best for society. This allowed us to get people saved, teach holiness in life and prepare for eternity. Others could look after society and did so with our approval and support. Life was good. We could focus on what mattered to us, all the while living in a society that was accommodating to us, giving us an essential Christian community, respecting what

we valued. Of course that came to shocking halt. But for our first 60 years, that was our world.

It wasn't that justice wasn't recognized but when up against the standard of getting people into heaven it simply didn't register as being important to our preaching, finances and organizations.

When that changed, we will leave to historians to discern. For me it was at the first Lausanne Congress, 1974. Rene Padilla and Samuel Escobar were the game changers for me. Their power of words, their evident anointing told me these men gifted and called had something to say that I needed to hear. In speaking with others, this moment, either in personal encounters or in subsequent meetings and readings unearthed a subject so dear to the Spirit that we who profess to be leaders in listening and being empowered by Him, better not ignore what he saying to the church.

However in the few moments left, there are two messages I wish to identify. First a brief look at the central role justice plays in the life and message of the entire biblical text and its place in the kingdom message. Then I want to point out what we might do to make the Pentecostal community a carrier of the message of justice into our surrounding world.

The word "just" is written on our foreheads. We know it well, speak of it often but in ways that may keep us from seeing its role and importance.

Here is what we know of the word.

Biblically, it forms the basis for society. Without it the "entire cosmic world would disintegrate, because justice is fundamental to the very nature of the Lord, the creator of the universe and to the core of God's government of history." (Wright, p 253).

But what is it? While we know we are to act justly, therefore making justice something we do, at its heart it is that which is rooted in the character of God. Justice as a framing and core of God's good world is what comes from him.

"Righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne. Ps 97:2

As Wright points out, justice is what God displays, what he demands and what he delivers.

Again what does it mean in its essence? Here we run into some confusion. The two words the Psalmist uses together—righteousness and justice – are almost the same, as to by synonymous.

"For the Lord loves righteousness and justice. Ps 33:5

The Hebrew root of justice means “straight” – a standard against which others are measured, that which we would expect to be normative. Within the Hebrew language there are two parts: one concrete and the other abstract.

See –

- “righteousness and peace kiss each other (Ps 85:11)
- Daniel 4:24 it becomes a word for giving alms to the poor. It means a rightness – that is something which ought to be. (See Wright’s chapter on righteousness and justice.).

The second root deals with judicial activity. As in “to put things right.”

Within the kingdom of Israel, we learn that God loves justice. He loves that of which he is. And from that he lays on Israel and us his requirement.

He has showed you, O man, what is good.
And what does the Lord require of you?
To do justice, and to love mercy
And to walk humbly with your God. Micah 6:8

Within the new covenant, this unfolds by way of the cross. And it flows from that through the Day of Pentecost into the known and unknown world.

What does justice look like from the cross?

We know that by his action, we are made right with the Father. The cross, the cruel and inhumane method of the Romans, has become the sign by which we understand what Jesus was doing on Golgotha. The dual physical dimensions of this construct are pedagogical.

First the upright plank becomes the linkage between the Creator and created. We are made righteousness by the willingness of the Son to be the penalty for our death. Indeed we are rescued by his death, like hands reaching between heavens and earth, our being right (or righteousness) before the Father is assured.

But we have a cross beam; a horizontal dimension. Crucifixion was not just for the unrighteous to become in right relationship with the Father. That inherent justice of being made right with him, now from the power of the nexus where the vertical links with the horizontal, links us together with his heart to extend that righteous act into the lives of others. As the vertical symbolizes his reaching down the horizontal symbolizes his reaching out to the world.

From Golgotha, we wend our way to the Upper Room.

The stories of Jesus are filled with expressions of the two dimensions, linking righteousness and justice as inseparable dynamics of the heart and character of our God.

The Prodigal Son illustrates the vertical. The Good Samaritan the horizontal.

Yet why have we been so long in coming to see the underlying worldly system which leans to the powerful, the rich and the aggressor?

For me there is one reason. But first let me say that within our historical experience and witness as a community, we have been easily touched and moved by those in need. The people to whom I speak are most quick to respond in giving and prayer is Pentecostals. So apart from what I noted earlier as to the reasons why we have come late to the matter, let me lay down what I think has been primarily to do with our stigmatism on the issue.

It is not that justice doesn't matter. Or that we have not read or seen its importance to the very heart of God. It has been that our lives have been lived outside of the power circles of society and we have not recognized that justice is more than a personal issue, where someone is dealt with unfairly. We have not seen that it is culturally systemic, inked into the unwritten codes of societal behavior. As cultural underlings for most of our lives, we have struggled to make our way into society ourselves. Now that we are mainstream, with the best-funded churches and originations, we are in a different role. Our people are running business. Families are building wealth. Our church members are running for public office. Our parents are judges, teachers, scientists, police, active in all streams and strata.

Let me offer some ways in which we as Pentecostals may choose to move forward in pleasing the Father by loving what he loves.

1. Fall in love with the idea.

I don't want to overstate this, but there are some parallels between part of our early history and the Jews. I knew what it was like to be despised not only by mainline liberals but by Evangelicals. The Roman Catholics in many places as well. We looked for others to offer us a just hearing and fair treatment.

Today that no longer is the case, in most places. Although I have travelled to some countries and visited pastors who have spent months in hospital because of treatment of other religions.

But now is the time to catch hold of what matters so much to the Father. What is it about justice that causes him to love? How can we link into his heart? What is so attractive and compelling to him that could be the an important part of what lifts us into renewed and a powerful witness?

2. Celebrate its importance to your people.

As we embrace what matters to the Father, begin to teach and preach from the Scriptures on what is key to his reign in life. In our preaching, let us find examples of how Christians have dealt with underlying injustice, freeing people up.

There are two important parts to this.

First is the way we treat each other, in church, families, neighborhoods and the work place. Provide examples of how treating others with justice is the extending of the nexus of the cross, allowing the flow of love and power to extend in to the lives of others.

The second important element is to see how the society is structured to favor the wealthy and powerful. Within the structures and laws, those on the bottom rungs are forever fighting to stay alive, dealing with laws, bureaucrats and societal bias that make it impossible for the weak and impoverished to get ahead.

3. Identify the danger in identifying with those being treated unjustly.

However let's not be naïve in understanding what happens when we stand for those being treated unjustly. There is a price to be paid. It is not easy. The crowd may turn against us.

I was in a country where Evangelicals, indeed Christians are the minority. Another minority religion is being treated unjustly: their house burned and people killed. I asked an Evangelical leader what was being done about the other religious minority. He denied it was much of an issue, even though we know it is globally a matter that concerns many. However in wanting to placate the government and its connection to the minority religion, he has chosen to ignore the plight of another group. He knows a price would be paid. Plus his own community resents the other religious minority and are not unwelcome to the treatment by the government on those they resent.

4. Lead your people by personal demonstration of what it means to extend the heart of God's justice to others.

Show the way. Not to grandstand, but to demonstrate the heart of the Father in extending justice to others.

Why does it matter that we engage today?

From our beginning, and through the first 50 to 75 years, we were a sect, in that we were outside the mainstream, focusing on the personal and the private, if not unconcerned about the more macro issues of our societies and world, for sure we were unsure of what our role might be.

Today that has changed. As one of the major world Christian and religious voices, we have a duty to lead. We no longer can let someone else do it. In many countries Pentecostals have reached new levels of social and economic well-being. I would argue that this is the time for us to provide leadership in ways that are both

consistent with the nature of the Father and are natural extensions of the work of Christ and the witness of the Spirit. Standing for and promoting justice gladdens the heart of the Father.

We may want to add in this contemporary world, a sign of what it means to be Pentecostal alongside glossolalia. And that is a willingness to suffer the backlash and unpopularity of siding with those being treated unjustly. Could it be that the Spirit is calling us to a powerful witness of Pentecost by walking a straight line from Golgotha to the Upper Room, and from there, out into the world giving substance to that which the Father loves – justice?

Story of fence movers

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