

Much has been written in response to the **Statement on Social Justice & the Gospel** since its release to the public on September 4<sup>th</sup>. For a document that articulates basic Protestant orthodoxy with such brevity and precision, the emotional outcry and negative reaction of some professing Christians is beyond my ability to comprehend.

It should also be made plain that it wasn't the Statement which initiated the current social media hysteria. According to a source whom shall remain undisclosed, much of the motivation for what culminated in the meeting in Dallas by the Statement's drafters was the recent T4G Conference's overt emphasis on social justice.

As a reformed Baptist, I could find no proposition in the Statement with which I take issue. If I am missing something—be it some theological error or covert white supremacy—please comment below or contact me at [nick@nopeacewithrome.com](mailto:nick@nopeacewithrome.com) and inform me of my shortsightedness. I am not being sarcastic (yet). Let me know where the problems in the Statement lie. After listening to hours of podcasts and reading numerous posts published in response to the Statement, I have yet to encounter any attempt to refute its affirmations and/or denials with a proper exegesis of Scripture. If the Statement is as controversial as the 'evangelical left' (an oxymoron) makes it out to be, surely they could pinpoint the specific propositions that have disrupted their already dangerously high levels of emotional instability. Simply put, affirming what the gospel *is* and denying what it is *not* shouldn't be interpreted as nostalgic longing for the antebellum South.



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6. The language used in statement echoes the theology & ecclesiology of slave masters & segregationists. Either the signers are profoundly ignorant regarding racial history in America or they have deeply troubling beliefs that echo American Christianized white supremacy.

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Having said that, it should be noted that attempts to use the Bible to defend social justice are not new and have been dealt with long before this Statement was produced. Consider, for example, Ronald Nash's 1983 book, *Social Justice and the Christian Church*. The same sort of eisegesis that Nash took to task thirty-five years ago is still prevalent in the social justice camp today.

*"...The word 'justice' has a variety of meanings. It is disconcerting to see someone quote a biblical text containing the word 'justice,' ignore all questions about the particular meaning the term has in that context, and simply presume that the verse functions as a proof-text for his position. For example, some of these verses refer not to distributive justice but to remedial justice. This is clearly true in the case of Exodus 23:6 which warns against depriving the poor man of justice but makes it obvious that the justice in view is that found in a court of law. The same chapter (Ex. 23:3) also warns against showing partiality toward the poor in a court of law."*[1]

Perhaps the only real difference between the variety of social justice seeping into the church when Nash wrote and what we are dealing with today is a matter of emphasis. Whereas social justice then demanded economic redistribution, social justice today, while not neglecting such 'inequality', seeks to emphasize redistribution of *guilt*. Racism, oppression and marginalization are key factors in today's variety of social justice. Victims (sorted according to skin color, economic disparity and/or sexual perversion) are everywhere. Straight, white, evangelical capitalists are lurking in the shadows, patiently plotting their next act of oppression toward the marginalized masses of minorities. "White privilege" is the weapon of choice to overwhelm the oppressors with white *guilt*, while the oppressed are encouraged to exchange sanctification for eternal victimhood.

Some will no doubt assume that what I am saying is that there is no such thing as racism. That is *not* what I am saying. I am saying that a worldview that divides Christians into categories of oppressed and oppressor—those who are perpetual victims and those who are perpetually guilty—has no biblical or theological foundation, and thus no business in the body of Christ.

I was not planning on taking up social justice more than I had previously in another context, but after engaging in more than a few conversations about this subject with brothers concerned that the social justice movement would erode the gospel foundation of local churches, and since Tom Ascol, John MacArthur, and other framers of the Statement are convinced that the issue of "social justice" may be the biggest threat to the gospel in our lifetime, such an issue has become impossible to ignore. And if these same men are being charged with promoting racism and white supremacy despite any evidence to support such allegations (a familiar tactic of the left), I am compelled to weigh in on it.

## If everything is social justice, nothing is social justice

Some have criticized the Statement for not containing an explicit definition of "social justice". Definitions are important. Without formal definitions it becomes very difficult to interact with an argument, and equivocation often runs rampant. But the drafters were wise to avoid crafting a definition. First of all, there is no question that any definition put forth would fail to satisfy all parties. "Social justice" is, indeed, as Kevin DeYoung of The Gospel

Coalition admits, “a nebulous term”. If readers refuse to accept a definition provided in the **Statement**, they may be inclined to dismiss its contents entirely.

Since “social justice” has come to mean just about anything, rather than expect a formal definition, it is better to discern what the framers of the **Statement** had in mind by reading its *Denials*. It is also clear that “social justice”—having no clear, unambiguous and agreed upon definition—is practically indistinguishable from the old social gospel. So, don't get upset when I use the terms interchangeably; they are often in reference to the same social issues and concerns.

In a 2013 discussion with Matt Chandler and David Platt, John Piper listed some of the things that might fall under the social justice banner:

*“...Abortion, racial prejudice, human trafficking, health care issues, immigration reform, so-called same-sex marriage, environmentalism...” (source).*

Mika Edmondson tweeted the following list of what he considers issues comprising “social justice”:

*“...physical well-being, social freedom and mobility, sense of dignity and belonging, educational & economic prospects, culture, history, life experiences.”*



If there is any reason to think critically about what these men have to say concerning social justice, and there is, it is safe to say that we have come upon a term that is all-encompassing. Virtually everything from abortion to sodomite 'marriage', to one's own "sense of dignity and belonging" are regarded as social justice issues. To compound the problem, when the *mission of the church* is reduced to (or conflated with) a vision so overwhelmingly broad so as to cover practically every issue in life, and when whatever we 'just simply don't like' is regarded as a societal injustice, the church's mission is left with no definite parameters.

Though I will not attempt to provide a definition of social justice that will satisfy everyone (such a task is obviously impossible), "a more precise definition is necessary, if for no other reason than the conviction that Stephen Neill's quip is spot-on: 'If everything is mission, nothing is mission.'" [2] My concern is more to do with evangelicalism's take on social justice than our satanic society's obsession with it, because the God-ordained mission of the church could be gradually and subtly redefined to include things foreign to the Great Commission.

In 2011, attempting to correct such "an overexpansive definition" of mission [3], Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert attempted to ward off some potential mission-drift:

*"In short, we will argue that the mission of the church is summarized in the Great Commission.... We believe the church is sent into the world to witness to Jesus by proclaiming the gospel and making disciples of all nations. This is our task. This is*

*our unique and central calling.”[4]*

Obviously, then, for the Christian concerned with social justice, such discussions require not only a biblical view of justice but also at least a minimal conception of what the ambiguous blanket term “social justice” is actually referring to. Consider the following definition:

*“The emphasis upon the application of Christian teaching to practical living, directed particularly to responsibility of real Christians toward unfortunates, alleviating the causes of injustices and inequities, to social and economic reforms—essential to the genius of Christianity.”*

Is that an appropriate description of “social justice”? If so, you might like to know that it is actually the definition of “social gospel” provided in a 1951 *Concise Dictionary of Religion*.<sup>[5]</sup> The entry continues:

*“The New England transcendentalists gave expression to this emphasis (some quite apart from the church). Twentieth-century prophet of the social gospel was Walter Rauschenbusch. The term became a target of attack on the part of those Protestant Christians who continued to support the traditional Reformation view that Christianity is essentially a religion of unmerited salvation (with good works only as fruits) and that, thus, the social gospel was a dangerous invitation to substitute an ethic for an evangelic and a gospel religion.”*

Perhaps this is an acceptable definition of “social justice”...

*“...A serious protest against the social wrongs and cruelties of the age, against the defects of the present economic system, against special privilege and entrenched injustice, against prevalent poverty, and hunger, and despair. It is not always an intelligent protest. Its cry is sometimes inarticulate and wild; but it voices the social unrest, the sullen discontent, the bitter envy and sorrow of thousands....”[6]*

That seems to describe it perfectly. Oh wait, my mistake, that's how Princeton Theological Seminary professor Charles Erdman defined *socialism* 100 years ago.

A bit difficult to find clear lines of demarcation, isn't it? Yet some in the social justice camp have strongly resisted the charge that social justice is merely the social gospel repackaged for a racially "woke" environmentally-friendly gender-bending generation.

Another significant term in this discussion is "liberation theology":

*"A movement that attempts to unite theology with social and religious principles for addressing oppression. It finds expressions among theologians from minority groups within numerous Christian denominations but it is best identified with the shift toward Marxism among Roman Catholic theologians and priests in Latin America. Influenced by the sociopolitical emphasis of the movement, Jesus and the Bible are defined and interpreted in light of class struggle, with the gospel seen as a radical call to activism (or even revolution) promoting political and social answers (usually in the form of classic Communism)."*[7]

Taking the above descriptions into consideration, am I wrong to suggest that the nebulous term "social justice" is serving as an ideological umbrella incorporating various elements of socialism, liberation theology, critical race theory, environmentalism and even sexual deviancy into its agenda with unjust allegations of racism and oppression its primary means of proselytization?

The framers of the **Statement** had every reason to take a stand against this seducing spirit of the age. I commend them for doing so. The purity of the gospel is surely at stake.

[Part 2]

[1] Nash, R.H., *Social Justice and the Christian Church*, Mott Media, Milford, Michigan, 1983, p. 69–70.

[2] DeYoung, K., & Gilbert, G., *What is the Mission of the Church? Making Sense of Social Justice, Shalom, and the Great Commission*, Crossway, Wheaton, IL, 2011, p. 18.

[3] DeYoung & Gilbert, ref. 2, p. 20.

[4] DeYoung & Gilbert, ref. 2, p. 26.

[5] Ferm, V., *Concise Dictionary of Religion*, The Philosophical Library, New York, NY, 1951, p. 241.

[6] Erdman, C.R., The church and socialism, in Torrey, R.A. et al. (eds.), *The Fundamentals*, volume IV (1917), Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI, 2008 (reprint), pp. 104—105.

[7] Walker, J.K (ed.), *The Concise Guide to Today's Religions and Spirituality*, Harvest House Publishers, Eugene, OR, 2007, p. 208.

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