

APPLICATION OF THE SOCIAL JUSTICE THEME IN THE PROPHETS

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A Paper

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By

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It has often been noted by those who study the writings of the Hebrew prophets that there is an intrinsic message of justice. This is often confused with the modern idea of social justice as is seen through activist like the preacher Martin Luther King Jr. or the lead singer of the band U2, Bono. While there may be some similarities between the message of these individuals and that of the prophets, and while there may be many principles modern activist can gain from the prophets, the call of the prophets must not be equated with the call of the modern activist. For instance, there is no nation on the earth at this point that is called to be the special people of God as Israel/Judah during the times of the prophets.

Yet there is a special people of God—the church—that can be called upon for action by prophets today. Also, there are many messages by the Hebrew prophets that display to sovereignty of God over all the nations, and that principle applies as much today as it did then. Therefore, we must be careful to avoid applying those elements of prophetic discourse that were covenantal to modern society. As an example we may note that some prophets lamented the buying of land by the rich which led to people selling the inheritance of God given to each tribe. It is fair to extract the principle that the rich should not scam the poor out of their possessions by paying less than those possessions are worth because the rich know the poor will take whatever is given to them. On the other hand it is incorrect to proclaim a prophetic curse on someone like Donald Trump simply because he purchases a lot of land. The prophecies concerning the land of Israel were covenantal, drawing from the Law of Moses and the decrees of the time of his successor, Joshua. These are by no means universal principles and there is nothing to suggest that all land everywhere belongs to this or that family *de facto*. Nor should prophecies regarding the Year of Jubilee or the Sabbath be proclaimed outside of the context of the covenant God established with Israel.

In this vein of thought we must note though that the prophets proclaimed the will of God as related to Israel, but also as would foreshadow the values of the universal Kingdom of God as established by the Messiah. The prophets proclaimed ideas related to justice and mercy that transcended the Law of Moses at times. Though the task of the interpreter is daunting at times it is his/her responsibility to seek to understand what part of the prophetic discourse is Israel-centric and what parts of the discourse foreshadow the universal reign of God for all times and all places.

That part of the prophetic discourse which transcends the Law of Moses should be seen as applicable. The application of this message should not be understood as being applied to a modern government such as Great Britain or the United States, per se, especially since these countries are filled with people who are not of faith, who are not the people of God, and who have not experienced the regenerative work of the Holy Spirit. Instead the church should be the audience of modern prophetic discourse since the prophet can only speak to the covenantal community when the prophet speaks to the Christian church. This is because the Christian church embodies the coming-yet-established Kingdom of God. Therefore the ethics of the Kingdom are to be lived by Christians, but likely it is too much to expect the outside world to abide by these commandments.

It is therefore part of the *identity* of the church to seek to manifest that which is said to be part of the Kingdom of God when it is fully established. Although this is a task the church will never fully succeed at doing it is nevertheless her calling. It is the calling of the church to point toward the Messianic age, as did the prophets, by proclaiming and living what the prophets proclaimed and lived as regards Messiah as the Holy Spirit assist the church.

This idea is not social justice and social justice is popularly defined. In fact when the church behaves as the church issues such as homosexual unions, abortion, war, and poverty become the task of the church and not the task of the government. By this it is meant that too often the church understands the message of the prophets to be directed at society proper while never directing it toward the society of God. The prophetic task of the church, as regards the abortion debate in the United States for example, is not centered on reversing *Roe v. Wade* or supporting this or that political party. Rather, the task of the church as the covenant people of God is to adhere to the message of the prophets by *being the change* that makes society different. In the case of abortion the Christian church must not spend her time protesting the laws of the land as much as she must spend her time extending her hand to those women who are making a decision regarding the life of their child. The prophetic action here would be to assure this woman that the church will be there to take care of her and her child if she keeps the child; it is hardly prophetic to simply tell society that society is wrong and misguided.

In this vision of social action the church applies the message of the prophets not by simply proclaiming it to pagan society and then going on her jolly way. Instead the church behaves different than society, does what society cannot do, and becomes the salt of the earth. The prophetic message regarding the Kingdom of God is thereby applied not through Christians changing secular governments and the laws, but by *being the church as an alternative society*.

It is at this point, and only at this point, that the church can follow those prophets who proclaimed the universal Kingdom of God, or rule of God. The church can now proclaim this reign of God because it is manifest in her actions. This is the essence of the Gospel—the proclamation that God is King through Christ. Lest this message is lived by the church the

church cannot engage in any so-called “social action” within society because she has yet to be an example of what that change should look like.