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**The Gospel Does Compel African Believers to Seek Proper Social Justice**

Rev. Dr. Joseph A. Thipa  
Vice Principal and Lecturer in Systematic Theology  
Zomba Theological College, TRS,  
Chancellor College, Malawi<sup>1</sup>

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**Introduction**

This paper constitutes a critical investigation of a theological basis for African Christian believers to seek proper social justice. Currently, Africa is experiencing a lot of social injustices that are leading to a lot of indignities among the African people. The investigation will be carried out in the light of the Kingdom of God as proclaimed by Jesus Christ as its King. This Kingdom of God is about our justification by God in his Son Jesus, which symbolized a rule with peace and justice. Justification is God’s radical, liberating grace,

<sup>1</sup> See TRS, Chancellor College, Malawi: [www.chanco.unima.mw](http://www.chanco.unima.mw) & [JosephThipa@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:JosephThipa@yahoo.co.uk).

which is given to human beings in Jesus, and it brings down the walls that separate human beings from God and from each other as human beings.

The paper has chosen two emphases about justice, *mishpat*, in the Old Testament. One of the designations of justice – of the noun *mishpat* – is justice that finds its source in God himself and carries with it God’s demand. For example, when Scripture speak of *mishpat* of God, the word has a particular shade of meaning, that of just claims of God. The other is justice, *mishpat*, as rightness rooted in God’s character, which ought to be an attribute of human beings in general and of judicial process among them (Psalm 106:37).

In the New Testament, therefore, the emphasis of justice and peace is seen is evident when Jesus bestows peace on those who are troubled with afflictions, healing them and telling them to go their way in peace. He also dies on the cross, justifying humankind for their sinfulness.

It is argued in this paper that African Believers, in gratitude of their receipt of justice and peace in Jesus Christ, will be capable of doing others the same justice they received freely from God – leading to their protection and upholding of the dignity of other human beings, despite who they are in society.

## **I. Justice, *Mishpat*, in the Old Testament**

In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word *mishpat* mainly designates justice or ordinance. But there are, also, many other designations of justice that we find in Scripture. For the purpose of this research paper, only three designations have been selected.

### **A. *Mishpat* as Ultimate Authority or Right**

One of the designations of justice – of the noun *mishpat* – is that of sovereignty in the sense of ultimate authority or right justice. It is authority that originates from God and travels through human beings to fellow human beings and other creations. For example, Deuteronomy 1:17b says, “Do not be afraid of any man, for judgment belongs to God.” Individual men and women, as created by God, have inalienable *mishpatim* (Culver 1974). Leading men of Israel, for example, were expected to judge fairly – *mishpat* – all cases brought to them with justice – *mishpat* – that comes from God. Also, Psalm 72:1-2 demonstrates that people in authority should be conferred

justice - *mishpat* – by God for them to judge all cases fairly. Justice – *mishpat* – in this context is understood as originating from God and provided for in human beings by God. Such is a context in Romans 13:1f, where the apostle says, “...for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authority that exists has been established by God.” Such is said to be the universal reign and rule of God, which seems to be the idea conveyed in Jeremiah 8:7, “My people do not know the law – *mishpat* – of God.

### **B. *Mishpat* as God’s Demand**

Another of the designations of justice is justice that finds its source in God himself and carries with it God’s demand. When Scripture speaks of justice – *mishpat* – of God, the word has a particular shade of meaning and that is not so much of statues of God as the just claims of God (Koehler: 205-206). God can demand and he demands. Such is expressed in Isaiah 30:18b, “For the Lord is a God of justice. Blessed are all who wait upon him!”

### **C. *Mishpat* as Rightness from God which Ought to be Human Attribute**

Also, justice – *mishpat* – means rightness rooted in God’s character, which ought to be an attribute of all human beings in general and of judicial and social processes among them. Wise men speak it (Psalm 37:30) and think it (Proverbs 12:5) and God requires it of them (Micah 6:8). The righteous enjoy it (Proverbs 21:15) and magistrates employ it in judgment (Micah 3:1; cf. Proverbs 29:4).

## **II. God’s Rule with Peace and Justice in the New Testament**

With reference to justice, *mishpat*, above, in Old Testament times God exercised his rule over the people of Israel through their king in covenant relationship (usually referred to as the Old Covenant), which did not prove successful. After the failure of this Old Covenant between God and Israel, God had improvised a New Covenant, and therefore, there grew up a hope of a coming king belonging to the royal line of David, who would rule in righteousness and peace and act as a shepherd of his people. “Righteousness”, here, has to do with “justice.” Since it was normal for a king to be appointed to his office in a ceremony of anointing, the Jews came to use the term “anointed one” for this future king. The Hebrew word meaning “anointed” has come over into English as “Messiah,” and corresponding Greek word

“Christ.” Jesus was, therefore, the appointed king through whom God would exercise his rule.

Unlike in the Old Testament where God ruled his people Israel indirectly through the kings, in the New Testament God rules his people directly in Jesus with peace and righteousness. In the Gospels, Jesus reflects the Old Testament concept of Justice and peace by prioritizing relations with God over those with other humans, including family (justice – *mishpat* – rightness rooted in God’s character, which ought to be an attribute of all human beings). Jesus bestows peace on those who are troubled with afflictions, healing them and telling them to go their way in peace (e.g. Luke 4:35; 8:48), and he commands peace upon physical elements (e.g. Mark 4:39). By doing so he illustrates his relationship to the world and to humanity as God’s agent. Such is justice – *mishpat* - authority that originates from God and travels through human beings to fellow human beings and other creations. In other words, in fulfilling the Kingdom of God, Jesus set people free from the power of evil, delivered them from illness and from guilt, and called them to follow him. He also preached good news to the poor, saying that the Kingdom of God belonged to them. Jesus, thus, bestows peace on those who are troubled with afflictions, healing them and telling them to go their way in peace (e.g. Luke 4:35; 50; 8:48), and he commands peace upon physical elements (e.g. Mark 4:39). By doing so he illustrates his relationship to the world and to humanity as God’s agent.

Also in the New Testament, Jesus willingly sacrificed himself by his death on the cross for God and for human salvation in order that he satisfies God’s justice (Romans 3:25) – justice – *mishpat* - authority that originates from God and travels through human beings to fellow human beings and other creations, which reaches out towards those afflicted, and at the same time dealing with the affliction itself – sin and its consequences. In the first place, God is justifiably angry with sinful human beings. They have rebelled against him and cut themselves from the life-giving power of God. But God declares Christ’s death to be the appropriate and designated sacrifice for human sin. Christ then stands in human being’s place, completely satisfying God’s demands (justice – *mishpat* - that finds its source in God himself and carries with it God’s demand), at the same time, paying the penalty of death for human sin. Jesus, thus,

gives African Christians a pattern of the life of determination in the struggle toward the liberation of those of their people that are under oppression of some kind and whose dignity is threatened. They even give up their lives in the struggle.

In the words of the Lutheran tradition, justification is God's radical, liberating grace, which is given to human beings in Jesus and brings down the walls that separate human beings from God and from each other as human beings. Here, God's grace not only allows human beings to be reconciled with each other, but it also compels them to seek proper social justice (Lutheran World Federation). Justice is the quality of the actions done by good humans in their relationship with others. Righteousness is the quality of heart which makes such action possible.

Also, in justification and by virtue of Jesus' righteousness, and not good works, human beings, that are not righteous in themselves, are reckoned as such before God. In gratitude, therefore, African Christian believers will be capable of doing others the same justice they received freely from God – leading to their protection and upholding of the dignity of other human beings (despite their undeservedness) in society.

### **III. God's Justice in Africa: Case Study of the CCAP in Malawi**

Apart from the Gospel compelling African believers to seek proper social justice, there is also an African view of God and one's relation to God, which goes along with cultural African view of society and its customs, represented in this research thesis by the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP.) in Malawi, of which Kenneth Ross is suspicious about. Kenneth Ross suspects the CCAP as being legalistic and its members doing good works that are not based on justification by Jesus and his righteousness, but out of obligation. In his survey of Malawian sermons and the general impression left by the Malawian preachers on their listeners, Kenneth Ross'<sup>2</sup> discovered that there is relatively little emphasis on the deity

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<sup>2</sup> Kenneth Ross has worked with the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian for many years as a missionary from the Church of Scotland. He may be amongst the pioneers in research about contemporary life and impact of these mainstream churches in Malawi. He made a very broad survey encompassing three different Malawian churches, Presbyterian, Anglican and Roman Catholic that fall within the category of "mainstream". He made a study of each one of these mainstream churches on its own, followed by a comprehensive and comparative study. His general objective was to provide a survey [Footnote continued on next page ... ]

and humanity of Christ in the practical lives of the Reformed Christians in contemporary Malawi. Instead, there is but more emphasis on the works of Christ than they do with features of God the Father or God the Holy Spirit (Ross 1995: 85; Wendland 2000: 18; Mijoga 2000: 114). Again, Ross' survey shows that more sermons dwelt substantially on either the need for personal conversion or duties of the Christian life (Ross 1995: 87). He, therefore sees extreme strong emphasis on law-keeping and good works, on the part of Malawian Christian believers, which gives him the impression that these believers in Malawi have it that good works do contribute to salvation (Paas 2006: 42). Of some significance too, Matthew, John, Luke, Acts, Mark, and Romans, were the five most commonly chosen books by Malawian preachers in the whole of the New Testament - whilst "practical" James and "moralistic" 2 Timothy were the more commonly chosen rather than the more doctrinal Ephesians and Colossians.

Kenneth Ross misses the point here, especially as he is dealing with issues affecting Africans. Construction of theology should be done out of the committed engagement with the contemporary life of the church (Ross 1998: 16-18; Fiedler 1999: 23). If Ross had done that, in the first place, he should have discovered that a Malawian view of God and one's relation to God goes along with cultural Malawian view of society and its customs (Ross 1996: 65), just as in the context of the first century the Law would not have seemed out of the ordinary in certain instances because the Law tended to be consistent with some Jewish cults that did not have written rules and regulations to govern their ethical behaviour, but were already there in the practical life of the Jewish people (Ehrman 1997: 35). Ehrman argues that good works by Jews in the Old Testament should not be marked as legalistic because God's Law had already been written in their hearts, even before the Law came to be emphasized by the Ten Commandments. So, too, amongst Malawians the works of Christ are consistent with some cults in their practical life. For example, individual members in Malawi society are willing to behave well towards neighbours and would do everything to achieve just that

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and analysis of the general message being preached and its effects in the life of the people of Malawi (Ross, *Gospel Ferment in Malawi*, p.82).

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because they are expected to do that by fellow members of society – justice, *mishpat* that finds its source in society as whole and carries with it the demand of Traditional Chief and other leaders in the community and eventually carries with it justice, *mishpat* - sovereignty in the sense of ultimate authority or right justice from the Supreme Being (with reference to God in African Traditional Religions). Right away from birth a child is trained, by parents and the rest of the community members, to behave well. This teaching never ceases even when one has grown into an adult.

Here, we should be careful that the actual knowledge of God, from which theology may be constructed, is not an idealistic or mystical form of knowledge but rather one that is worked out in personal discipleship and social praxis. It is the Bible as it is read and internalised, and found application in the life of the community that creates the field within which the theologian can operate. Therefore, there is no theology that is culture free (Musopole 1998). We cannot artificially create an African theology or even plan it, but it must evolve spontaneously as the church teaches and lives her faith and in response to the extremely complex situation in Africa (Bueta ed. 1968: 332).

### **Conclusion**

Real justice and peace, therefore, comes from God himself because, in the eternity, it resulted in God making peace with himself as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This justice and peace, God-self experienced way back in eternity, and continues to experience today, before he actually came to share it with his human beings, whom he created in his own image (Genesis 2:7). By creating human beings in his own image, God willingly shared with us his inner feelings of love and peace. It is not surprising that unity and diversity in the Trinity are also reflected in the human relationships God has established.

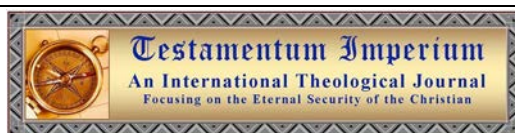
This justice and peace that God shares with his creation are, therefore, transformative. It has been transformative to God-self such that he did feel internally restless about it, and hence, he was unable to keep them within himself. The result being, “Let us make man in our own image.” Such justice and peace is so impressive and does lead one toward transformation of life. Once one has had the experience of such justice and peace from God - one will definitely feel restless until one extends that peace and justice towards others in

society. It is in Jesus and what he did in his life and death that God grants us his justice and peace. Only as God's agents in Jesus' Christ are we able to do others social justice in the society that we live. In Jesus, therefore, African Christian believers are capable of doing social justice in the same way and manner that God in Jesus treated them – leading to their protection and upholding of the dignity of other human beings (despite their undeservedness) in society.

At the same time, the traditional social structure among Africans is that of community and good neighbourliness. Among most African communities, the problem of an individual is the problem of the whole society; what belongs to one, belongs to everyone in that society. This is consisted with the teaching of Jesus Christ about his church, with him as its head.

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