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Deeper Understanding for More Resilience in the Work for Peace and Justice

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Abstract:

How does the blessing of shalom/eirene incorporate justice and how does the pursuit of justice build the sort of godly relationships that are present in a healthy community? The eternal call to do justice is inherently intertwined with Jesus’ call. This paper expects to contribute to a deeper understanding of the biblical teachings on peace and justice, with the hope of encouraging resilience among Christians working with most vulnerable communities. The author also hopes that these reflections will contribute to mobilize faith communities to support justice and peace initiative in their respective contexts.

Introduction: Why should Christians be resilient in the pursuit of justice and peace?

Being resilient can be understood as being capable of withstanding shock without permanent deformation or rupture. Just a few days ago, I had the privilege of visiting a number of Christians working in some of the most dangerous neighborhoods of Central America. Between smiles and tears, joy and yes, I must admit, fear for my own safety, I walked with them through streets filled with children and teens, women and me trying to survive one more day. The impact of injustice is obvious in the lives of people who work so hard, and yet live in infrahuman conditions. Many of those teens will join a mara or gang, others will be caught by organized crime, a number of them will die before they turn 25. Christians working among people in miserable material conditions, tend to understand well the calling to build a better world, many times at a high price. The pain for the suffering of their fellow humans – especially children, teens, mothers, and the frustration they feel with what they perceive as the indifference of many other Christians.

On the other hand, well-intentioned fellow Christians tend to assume that, since perfect justice will only be achieved when the Lord returns, opportunities to build more just and peaceful societies in this broken world are limited to a few hot-button issues. Confronting overspread violence, corruption, and other forms of abuse are not priorities in their agenda.

And yet, several of the prophets of the Old Testament as well as Jesus and his disciples in the New Testament bravely confronted the authorities and the people with messages from God that required them to seriously reconsider their attitudes and behavior toward all spheres of life in light of the demands of God’s justice.
At a time when our world is hard hit by the effects of great social and economic injustice, and the increasing rise of nationalist and authoritarian tendencies that feed hate and discrimination against those who are different and more vulnerable, the challenge of building more just and peaceful communities remains quite difficult and demands great resilience from those who dare take God’s kingdom and his justice seriously. Like Jesus himself—in the context of a very broken reality, living under an abusive and violent empire—we are called to pray, “your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” This means that, even when we know that we will not be able to see a perfect society in our time, God cares for the conditions in which people live, and there is much which God can do through His people to confront the prevailing expressions of deception, coercion, violence, greed, corruption and abuse of power in today’s societies.

Building up resilient Christian workers requires several important factors. In this paper, I would like to address only one of them. In my inquiries with brave Christians working for justice throughout Latin America, it has become very clear that a deep understanding of the principles of shalom and justice in the Bible constitute one of those relevant factors that enable them to be resilient in the face of adversity. Not only that, such deeper understanding demands a re-reading and a re-interpretation of Biblical teaching, which probably will confront some commonly held assumptions about God’s will that tend to obscure the otherwise very clear call to pursue justice. God himself calls us to care about justice because justice is one of his character traits and, as creatures made in his image, we are to reflect his character.

With the hope of contributing to such understanding, I this paper I try to dig deeper into the relationship between justice and peace and God’s will for human society. I start with considering the meaning and collective implications of the biblical concept of *shalom* (OT)/ *eirene* (NT) and how it cannot be separated of justice. A discussion on the qualities of biblical justice follows, inviting all of us to reflect on its implications in our daily lives as Christian members of diverse societies.

I. The Blessing of Shalom/Eirene

Some of us may be more familiar with the beautiful Hebrew blessing, *shalom*. *Eirene* is its equivalent in the New Testament. As a derived word of the Greek term *eiro* (“to join”), it has the emphasis of joining what had been severed or disturbed. Eirene is a powerful biblical term that emphasizes the restoration of relationships previously broken. Like shalom, *eirene* and its implications in our daily lives tend to be reduced if not ignored altogether.

A first common misconception about *shalom/eirene* is that they mean peace, understood merely as the absence of conflict. For many evangelical believers, it is peace in very individual terms, in the context of a vertical relationship between God and the believer that excludes the community. But examining these terms provides an opportunity to discover a richness and breadth that will help us understand why justice is so important in God’s eyes. Some of us may think—and this may even be a cultural challenge for some of us—that avoiding talking about difficult issues in order to “preserve the peace,” is a good thing. This, however, may actually prevent the possibility of resolving an issue by not being willing to have an honest discussion about it. How much more serious this issue can become when the situation is actually a great injustice.

*Shalom* in the Old Testament is also translated not only as “peace,” but also as “completeness,” “soundness,” and “well-being.” While these terms may sound familiar to those coming from individualistic cultures, Christians must be careful not to miss the collective implications of this biblical
term. *Shalom* is used in the Bible “to describe the ideal state in which the community should function.”iv Depending on the context, *shalom* can also be translated as “restitution,” “reparation,” and even “fulfilling a contract.” It is always about relationship, caring for it and restoring it when something has gone wrong. In addition, it is often used in the Bible when praying for the welfare of another person, as well as when praying for the good of a city or a country. In addition to harmony and concord, *Eirene* equally refers to a state of national tranquility.v

*Shalom* has strong associations with truth, justice and righteousness. This suggests that the biblical conception of peace is much more than just a passive state of mind, or a scape from the real world. Rather, the blessing of *shalom/eirene* is receiving from God an active and dynamic attitude towards life that cannot remain silent in the face of cruelty and abuse. The fruit of such attitude and effort is the result of God's blessing acting through his human instruments. *Shalom/eirene* is a state in which all relationships are as God designed them to be. In consequence, the blessing of *shalom/eirene* does not refer only to our inner peace with God—which, of course, is quite important as the foundation of who we are what we want to do—but it is a notion that can only be fully understood in community, as a blessing meant to be enjoyed collectively.

Understanding that God’s will is that His people pursue *shalom/eirene* on earth has important implications for how we must care for and bless one another and the world around us, particularly those who are victims of injustice. Since in this fallen world we will never attain complete *shalom/eirene*, we need to be resilient, so that we can join efforts toward restoring God's original intent in our community and the wider society.

Different from Lerner (1980:11-15), who insists that humans need to believe that the world is inherently a safe and just place, biblical teaching does not assume *shalom/eirene* as the premise that all human beings are essentially good and that everything will be fine as long as we remain optimistic. To the contrary, recognizing that too much hurt and injustice exist in the world, and that violence, corruption, abuse and greed steal people’s very lives, God’s will is that His people become active in confronting undue suffering and work to sow the seeds of justice and peace.

**II. The Life and Death of Jesus of Nazareth invites us to be resilient in our pursuit of justice**

Through his life, Jesus of Nazareth exemplified a serious concern for doing justice and showing compassion, particularly in the lives of those suffering the most. His sacrifice on the cross was offered to honor all the demands of God’s eternal justice on our behalf. Only because of that sacrifice, humans can have *shalom/eirene* with God.vi This peace with God provides the context for us to have peace with others,vii and empowers us to be resilient as we pursue a ministry of justice,viii peacemaking,ix and reconciliation.x Jesus promises to give us his peace, a peace that passes human understanding.xi I recently had the opportunity of seeing this with my own eyes. Observing how Christian men and women cultivate *shalom/eirene* beyond all human understanding, by teaching children in the garbage dumps of *La Terminal* (where the poorest of the poor separate garbage for recycling purposes) and in *La Limonada*, one of the most dangerous neighborhoods in Guatemala City, with the hope that by helping them read, write, and do math, and learn about the love of Jesus of Nazareth, those children and teens will not end in a *mara*, in prison, or killed. I have also seen it in the lives of Christians who work tirelessly with children who have been victims of sexual violence and other forms of cruelty in the Andean countries, sharing with them—in the midst of humanly hopeless situations of material deprivation and emotional neglect—that God wants to renew their lives, filling them with dignity, empowerment and
the blessing of *shalom/eirene*. But the toll in the lives of those Christian workers is immense and they need to be resilient, and it is important that local communities of faith understand their needs and contribute to caring for them.

The sacrifice of Jesus of Nazareth also enables us to seek *shalom/eirene* in relation to our planet. We are accountable to God for stewarding this beautiful planet that he has given us.\textsuperscript{xii}

Pursuing *shalom/eirene* is only possible because of the sacrifice of Jesus of Nazareth, but it is also a responsibility of God’s people. Therefore, a full understanding of biblical peace speaks of the need for building relationships in which God’s will and purposes are made apparent. When we cultivate *shalom/eirene* in our interpersonal relationships, we are capable of confronting issues of injustice openly and deal with disagreement in an honest way, rejecting corruption, violence and unethical coercion but not shunning away from real conflict to right a wrong. While the specific ways in which Christians will fulfill this responsibility will look somewhat different in different contexts, an honest concern for justice and *shalom/eirene* needs to become part of Christian identity in contextually appropriate forms. But pursuing peacemaking and doing justice are tough work and can be very dangerous in most parts of the world. Pursuing them may not, in the end, make us “happy,” at least as happiness is popularly understood. But seeking God’s kingdom and his justice does bring the blessing of *shalom/eirene* to our communities.\textsuperscript{xiii}

**III. What happens when we pursue justice**

The idea of justice encompasses four elements, distribution, power, equity and rights.\textsuperscript{xiv} This is especially relevant when we think of human rights. When we pursue justice, we focus on ensuring that people receive fair shares of that to which they are entitled because of their dignity as human beings, because every person has been created in the image of God. This means working towards ensuring that power is legitimately acquired and used; that courts and other fora in which disputes are resolved be impartial; and that adequate protections be given to those who are most vulnerable. As Marshall has concluded, “(J)ustice entails the exercise of legitimate power to ensure that benefits and penalties are distributed fairly and equitably in society, thus meeting the rights and enforcing the obligations of all parties.”\textsuperscript{xxv}

Biblical justice includes these elements with the purpose of restoring relationships. Again, on the cross, Jesus of Nazareth fulfilled all the demands of God’s justice to redeem us. God did not discard the demands of justice. We must not assume that justice is not important in the delicate labor of helping people restore their communion with each other, and helping people be restored in their relationship with their family, their community, and the wider society. While many times going back to the way things were before the harm was inflicted is not humanly possible, we need to look for ways to repair the harm done to all parties as much as possible.

*Mishpat* is one of several Hebrew terms for “justice.” This term is particularly important because it confronts another common misconception. Contrary to what many Christians think, justice in the Bible is not an abstract concept. *Mishpat* involves two very relevant concerns, primary justice and rectifying justice. Primary justice is the presence of relationships that reflect and uphold the inherent rights of human beings due to their equal dignity as bearers of God’s image. Rectifying justice is the system that corrects and restores those inherent rights when they have not been adequately upheld. This is a clear reference to God’s concern for human responsibility regarding the administration of justice and justice through other public institutions (e.g., just laws fairly applied, judicial procedures
without bias, appropriate police function; the need for a corrective component (e.g., sentences and fines for transgressors that do not destroy human dignity but upheld the rights of the victims and those of the offenders); and a restorative component (e.g., victims and offenders coming together to resolve the damage caused by the offender's actions). God sent courageous prophets to confront Israel's leaders both for failing to implement primary justice and for impeding the work of rectifying justice through bribery and favoritism. These ancient Hebrew concerns carry over into the New Testament. Jesus of Nazareth pronounced striking condemnations of Israel and its leaders, for attending to the details of the law while neglecting the most important matters of God's law, which are "justice, mercy and faithfulness." 

Another relevant term is tsedaqah, which has been commonly translated to modern languages as "righteousness." As with shalom, there are various other renderings, depending on context. Tsedaqah can also be translated as justice, fairness, doing the right thing, equity, and integrity. The term connotes human well-being, as well as right behavior. One of God's names, attributed to the Messiah by the Prophet Jeremiah, is Yahweh Tsidkenu, which means "the Lord is our Justice." And the beautiful tradition in the Hebrew culture of helping the poor as a responsibility before God is also known as Tsedaqah. Another common misconception in this regard is to think that God wants us to give charity to the poor, while what he demands is that we do justice by enabling them to find opportunities to stand on their own feet.

My admired friend and renowned Christian philosopher, Nicholas Wolterstorff, has argued that, "(J)ustice...prevails in human relationships insofar as persons render to each other what they have a right to," in other words, justice is present when people are treated with the respect their worth requires. For Christians, this brief sentence can serve as a summary of what all of Scripture has to say about "justice," whether at the interpersonal level, or at the collective level. For Scripture describes all human beings as God's image and commands us to love others as we love ourselves. Viewed from this perspective, the Ten Commandments are a summary of what it means to treat God and others "justly," rendering to others "what they have a right to," including God himself. If shalom/eirene includes the "steady state" of primary justice that exists when the peace of God is present, rectifying justice amounts to the equilibrium-restoring actions that, when fully and rightly pursued, move God's people toward shalom/eirene.

Justice is corrective, it imposes consequences to our wrong behavior to help us discern right from wrong. It therefore has a punitive dimension, as expressed in Romans 12:19 and Exodus 34:6-7. But, God's justice also has a very clear redemptive purpose in the lives of human beings. After committing terrible crimes, David cried to God, "Deliver me from bloodguilt...and my tongue will sing of your tsedaqah." Following this same principle, John the Apostle encouraged believers to repent and be resilient with the promise that, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness." 

Conclusion: True Justice is never separated from Compassion

The pursuit of biblical justice means, first of all, that individuals and communities accept their responsibility, that they are able to admit wrongdoing and confess and seek forgiveness and reparation, not denying their responsibility for the presence of injustice in their land.

Secondly, pursuing biblical justice means recognizing that justice exists in close relationship with compassion, so much that the two concepts are often juxtaposed in the Scriptures. God expects His
people to act justly and mercifully. God places them side by side in order that they influence one another in our daily lives.

Justice has also very relevant implications in our personal walk with God. God's justice demands are to be taken seriously as we come to his presence. He said through Isaiah, "Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to lose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free...?" God's justice demands make us realize that we need to change our hearts as well as our words and actions; caring for those who suffer injustice in our community shows that we love our neighbors.

Justice demands us to be impartial, but also partial. This is an interesting paradox. On the one hand, we are clearly commanded, in both Testaments not to show favoritism. Rectifying justice includes the concern for procedural fairness in the way justice is administered in court and equivalent fora. On the other hand, God also takes the side of widows, orphans, aliens, and the poor. The reason God shows such favoritism is precisely because those people are not treated with impartiality. God rectifies justice by singling out the most vulnerable groups in society. This is completely consistent with Jesus' teaching. He said that when the sheep and goats are separated on the day of judgment, how we responded to the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick and the prisoners are criteria for who gets placed in which fold. This does not mean that our acts of justice will save us, but rather that our "works"—as reflected in our treatment of those who suffer injustice in our day—are an indication of who we truly worship, Mammon or God. This is the basis for a deeper understanding—and not merely in platonic terms—of what Jesus affirmed after reading the promise of Isaiah 61 in the synagogue and his announcement that, "Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.

If God's justice demands require that we treat people according to their worth and render to them what they are due, it follows that when we work for the rights of the needy, we are not merely showing compassion or charity, neither should we reduce our responsibility toward the most vulnerable as mere acts of charity. Failing to care for the poor and the vulnerable is not just stinginess; it is unrighteousness. Failing to pursue ways to correct the injustice that steals them of opportunities is also unrighteousness. It is a failure of our obligation to give people what they are due, to treat them with the respect they deserve—the broad definition of justice. Doing justice involves the righting of wrongs (rectifying justice) and the creation of a community of righteous relationships (primary justice).

Bibliography

End Notes

\[i\] I would like to acknowledge my good friend Chip Zimmer with whom we published “Our Calling to Pursue Peace and Justice” earlier last year. Several sections of this paper are based on our collaboration for that article.


\[iii\] Matthew 6:10.


\[vi\] Romans 5:1-2; Colossians 1:19-20; 2 Corinthians 5:18-19; 1 Tim. 2:5-6.

\[vii\] 1 Peter 3:10-12; Romans 12:17-21.

\[viii\] Jeremiah 22:16; Micah 6:8.

\[ix\] Matthew 5:9.

\[x\] 2 Corinthians 5:18-20.

\[xi\] John 14:27; Philippians 4:7.

\[xii\] Genesis 1-2; Romans 8:18-21; Colossians 1:15-20.

\[xiii\] Matthew 6:33.

\[xiv\] Marshall 1989:6-7

\[xv\] Marshall, 1989:7

\[xvi\] Deuteronomy 27:19; Micah 7:3; Isaiah 58:6, etc.

\[xvii\] Matthew 23:23.


\[xix\] See Jeremiah 22:16 and the powerful connection between pursuing for the poor and the vulnerable, and knowing God. It is worth noting that the highest level of tsedaqah implies walking alongside the person in need until they are able to stand on their own feet.

\[xx\] Wolterstorff, 2015: 86-90.
Psalm 51:4.

I John 1:9.

Micah 6:8; Zechariah 7:9; see also Matthew 23:23.

Isaiah 58:3-10.

Leviticus 19:15; Zechariah 7:9; James 2:1.


