

# THE JUSTICE DEMAND: SOCIAL JUSTICE AND THE SINGAPORE CHURCH

By Ronald JJ Wong

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## 3 How did social justice evolve through the Bible? – Justice, Mercy and Righteousness in the Old Testament

### A. Intended beneficiaries of socio-economic justice laws

#### *Zelophehad's inheritance*

An example of how entitlements to land and inheritance in Old Testament Israel were patriarchal is the issue of land inheritance entitled to one Zelophehad who passed away before receiving the inheritance. In Numbers 27, Zelophehad's daughters appealed to Moses to have the land inheritance transferred to them and not be forfeited simply because their father had no son and therefore their father's lineage could not be preserved. Moses sought the Lord, who adjudicated the matter and held that Zelophehad's daughters were "right" and ought to be given possession of their father's land inheritance.

However, this decision appeared to be merely an interim judgment. Sometime later in Numbers 36, the male relatives of the Manassite clan which Zelophehad belonged to appealed to Moses and pointed out another issue. If the daughters were entitled to the land, and if they were to later marry men from other clans, the land inheritance would be transferred to another clan. This would be contrary to the intended land distribution scheme, which provided that the land was to be kept within each tribe, clan and family for the purpose of the Jubilee reset. Moses determined that they were correct, and so ordered Zelophehad's daughters to marry within the tribe of Manasseh so that their land inheritance would stay within the clan and tribe.

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## 5 What does social justice mean to me? – Social Justice, the Micah Mandate and Covenantal Faithfulness

### A. Social Justice as Term of Art

What was the origin of the term “social justice”? Michael Novak explains that the term was first coined by a Sicilian Catholic priest Luigi Taparelli D’Azeglio, S.J., in his book *Theoretical Treatise on Natural Right Based on Fact* (1840-1843) to posit a certain virtue relating to the older expression of “general justice” used by Aristotle and Aquinas.<sup>1</sup> Subsequently, Pope Leo XIII wrote in his encyclical, *Rerum Novarum* (1891), that social justice is not about equality; in fact, equality is a bad thing—just imagine if everyone were a lawyer! Social justice later evolved to become many different things. John Rawls, for instance, set out on his political philosophy project to construct a theory of society which epitomizes social justice. Different ideas and associations attributed to the term resulted in social justice becoming understood as a redistributive welfare state system.

Regardless of the inherent ambiguity of the term and its contested meanings, I nevertheless adopt the term ‘social justice’ for several reasons. I use the term social justice as a convenient expression to distinguish justice as it pertains to social aspects of people and communities, as opposed to legal-adjudicative justice. The former may encompass the latter, but not the converse. This is because the law cannot perfectly obtain holistic justice for a person.

First, the law cannot ensure economic justice. While legislation can impose taxes, there is only a limit to the effectiveness of taxation as a means of economic justice. The rich have the means to evade taxes. Further, excessively redistributive laws would violate property rights and the value of personal responsibility, both of which are biblical principles enshrined in the Mosaic Law.

Second, the law cannot ensure social inclusion and relationships. The law cannot create or place enforceable obligations on community. We cannot legally mandate people

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Novak, “Defining Social Justice”, *First Things* (December 2000); Michael Novak, “Three Precisions: Social Justice”, *First Things* (12 January 2009).

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or communities to love one another, to empathize, to show care. Contrast that with artistic, social or cultural programmes. One example is Just A Handful of Coins, a festival I co-organised under HealthServe to bring different communities together. At the festival, we did away with the concept of paid tokens and made people 'earn' tokens for food, games, flea market goods and prizes by participating in conversations—that was how we got people from different nationalities, ethnicities, languages, professions, socio-economic backgrounds to talk to one another. Can the law ever mandate something like that?

Third, the law cannot be perfectly enforced in this world. The inevitable scarcity of resources in this world means that there will always be insufficient resources to enforce the law. Further, people are not omniscient. Because administering legal justice is contingent on evidence, i.e. the proof of historical events, evidential difficulties often arise in the enforcement of legal rights and remedies. Moreover, not every moral right can be made an enforceable legal right.

Fourth, the law can sometimes produce unjust outcomes. Man-made laws are imperfect and may be imperfectly applied. The fact that even good, intelligent judges often disagree with one another supports this.

Fifth, man-made law is the outcome of political and moral conflicts. It follows that conflicting morals, values and political goals result in compromises and inadequate provisions in the law.

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## 6. Discovering justice and mercy ministers in Singapore – *Social Justice and Evangelism*

### **A. Social Gospel, Liberal Theology, Liberation Theology**

The “social gospel” was a new paradigm of Christian theology which emerged in the United States in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. A helpful starting point is the acknowledgement that “the social gospel is a phenomenon that is difficult to define or contain ... At the popular level, the words ‘social gospel’ ... have become so overused or misused as to obscure their generic and historic meaning ... It has been used as a label or libel depending on the bias of the speaker”.<sup>2</sup>

To put simplistically, the social gospel is an intellectual and social movement to redefine Christianity to deal with socio-economic problems such as poverty and oppression. “[W]hat united many adherents of the social gospel was their belief that knowledge of God was only available when theological reflection become one with social action and with participation in the social struggles of humanity”.<sup>3</sup>

#### ***Walter Rauschenbusch’s Social Gospel***

A major proponent of the social gospel was Walter Rauschenbusch. Two of his works are significant in this regard: *Christianity and the Social Crisis*<sup>4</sup> and *A Theology for the Social Gospel*.<sup>5</sup> Rauschenbusch was influenced by his personal contact with poverty during the Industrial Revolution in his pastorate of a church of German immigrants outside a slum in Hell’s Kitchen, New York City.<sup>6</sup> Amidst the poverty, he saw that professing Christians were benefitting from industrialization and ignoring the plight of the

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<sup>2</sup> Ronald Cedric White and Charles Howard Hopkins, *The Social Gospel: Religion and Reform in Changing America* (Temple University Press, 1976) at xii.

<sup>3</sup> Christopher H. Evans, ed., *The Social Gospel Today* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001) at 6, cited in Chuck Currie, “Walter Rauschenbusch and The Social Gospel” (Fall 2004).

<sup>4</sup> Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (New York: The Macmillan company; London, Macmillan & co., ltd., 1907).

<sup>5</sup> Walter Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (New York: The Macmillan company; London, Macmillan & co., ltd., 1917).

<sup>6</sup> William M. Ramsay, *Four Modern Prophets* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1986) at 10, cited in Chuck Currie, “Walter Rauschenbusch and The Social Gospel” (Fall 2004).

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poor. He thus came to believe that sin was not just 'social' (drinking, dancing, gambling) but included social indifference, political corruption and economic greed.<sup>7</sup> In *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, he explained the enterprise of the Social Gospel thus:<sup>8</sup>

“The social gospel is the old message of salvation, but enlarged and intensified. The individualistic gospel has taught us to see the sinfulness of every human heart and has inspired us with faith in the willingness and power of God to save every soul that comes to him. But it has not given us an adequate understanding of the sinfulness of the social order and its share in the sins of all individuals within it. It has not evoked faith in the will and power of God to redeem the permanent institutions of human society from their inherited guilt of oppression and extortion.”

It is important to realise that Rauschenbusch did not abandon the notion of individual sin and salvation. Instead, he sought to expand the concept of sin and salvation as including collective social sin and salvation. The former being that social order and institutions are capable of being in sin by way of the super-personal forces of evil manifested in social realities.<sup>9</sup> The latter being that gospel of salvation includes redemption of social order and institutions. In fact, he “concentrated his writings around issues of sin, salvation, the Kingdom of God, and the role of Jesus”.<sup>10</sup> Sin to him was “selfishness ... The sinful mind, then, is the unsocial and anti-social mind. To find the climax of sin we must not linger over a man who swears, or sneers at religion, or denies the mystery of the trinity, but put our hands on social groups who have turned the patrimony of a nation into the private property of a small class, or have left the peasant labourers cowed, degraded, demoralized, and without rights in the land. When we find

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<sup>7</sup> William M. Ramsay, *Four Modern Prophets* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1986) at 13, cited in Chuck Currie, “Walter Rauschenbusch and The Social Gospel” (Fall 2004).

<sup>8</sup> Walter Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (New York: The Macmillan company; London, Macmillan & co., ltd., 1917) at 5.

<sup>9</sup> Walter Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (New York: The Macmillan company; London, Macmillan & co., ltd., 1917) 69.

<sup>10</sup> Chuck Currie, “Walter Rauschenbusch and The Social Gospel” (Fall 2004) at 5.

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such in history, or in present-day life, we shall know we have struck real rebellion against God on the higher levels of sin".<sup>11</sup>

The social gospel's "critics, both contemporaries and later commentators, have pointed out that it was fundamentally a social movement ... the Niebuhr brothers, Reinhold and Richard, criticized the optimistic formulations of a theology that did not deal seriously enough with either the transcendence of God or the reality of sin and evil".<sup>12</sup> Rauschenbusch pre-empted and did not deny the charge that the social gospel places much weight of sin on social order and institutions rather than the individual person. Yet, he appears to deny that this would exculpate the individual of the charge of sin. Only that there is a higher-level sin with respect to social order and institutions.<sup>13</sup> He unequivocally stated that "the salvation of the individual is, of course, an essential part of salvation".<sup>14</sup>

On the doctrine of evil and the Fall, Rauschenbusch stated: "The traditional doctrine of the fall has taught us to regard evil as a kind of unvarying racial endowment, which is active in every new life and which can be overcome only by the grace offered in the Gospel and ministered by the Church. It would strengthen the appeal of the social gospel if evil could be regarded instead as a variable factor in the life of humanity, which it is our duty to diminish for every young life and for every new generation".<sup>15</sup> Salvation then requires bringing state and socio-economic order and institutions under the law of Christ.<sup>16</sup> The Church is therefore "the social factor in salvation. It brings social forces to bear on evil".<sup>17</sup> He argues that "the Kingdom of God [is] always coming, always pressing in on the present, always big with possibility, and always inviting immediate action ... [it

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<sup>11</sup> Walter Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (New York: The Macmillan company; London, Macmillan & co., ltd., 1917) at 50.

<sup>12</sup> Ronald Cedric White and Charles Howard Hopkins, *The Social Gospel: Religion and Reform in Changing America* (Temple University Press, 1976) at xvi-xvii.

<sup>13</sup> Walter Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (New York: The Macmillan company; London, Macmillan & co., ltd., 1917) at 33.

<sup>14</sup> Walter Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (New York: The Macmillan company; London, Macmillan & co., ltd., 1917) at 95.

<sup>15</sup> Walter Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (New York: The Macmillan company; London, Macmillan & co., ltd., 1917) at 43.

<sup>16</sup> Walter Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (New York: The Macmillan company; London, Macmillan & co., ltd., 1917) at 117.

<sup>17</sup> Walter Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (New York: The Macmillan company; London, Macmillan & co., ltd., 1917) at 119.



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is] humanity organized according to the will of God".<sup>18</sup> According to Rauschenbusch, "[t]he Kingdom of God can be progressively realized with the co-operation of the divine and the human, but the Kingdom of God can never be perfectly realized. Rauschenbusch did not expect utopia to arrive within the contingencies of human history, but he did think it was possible to create a better social order than the one offered by capitalism".<sup>19</sup> On the conception of God, Rauschenbusch believed that the Social Gospel bettered the Reformation by positing a democratic notion of God, which according to him, Jesus brought about.<sup>20</sup> In this respect, he argues that God's solidarity with humanity, and the consciousness of solidarity, "is of the essence of religion".<sup>21</sup> He also believed that it was social sins—religious bigotry, political power and graft, corruption of justice, mob spirit and action, militarism and class contempt—which Jesus atoned for on the Cross.<sup>22</sup>

At this juncture, several comparisons are appropriate. First, the conception of biblical social justice I have sought to draw out from the Bible holds the individual person as the central loci of sin. The individual person has sinned by failing to live in accordance with God's ways of justice and righteousness. This is unlike Rauschenbusch's view of sin being located collectively in the social, economic and political orders and institutions.

Second, the biblical social justice I have articulated considers salvation to be in relation to the individual person having been forgiven of his sins and thereby reconciled to God and admitted into the Kingdom of God. This is unlike Rauschenbusch's view that it is human systems and institutions which are to be salvaged and redeemed. No doubt, human systems and institutions can be transformed by human agents to approach certain ideals which embody the values and standards of God's justice and

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<sup>18</sup> Walter Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (New York: The Macmillan company; London, Macmillan & co., ltd., 1917) at 141-142.

<sup>19</sup> Julian Gotobed, "Walter Rauschenbusch (1861-1918)" Boston Collaborative Encyclopedia of Western Theology (1994); c.f. Earle E. Cairns, *Christianity Through The Centuries, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn.* (Zondervan, 1996) at 439.

<sup>20</sup> Walter Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (New York: The Macmillan company; London, Macmillan & co., ltd., 1917) at 174-175.

<sup>21</sup> Walter Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (New York: The Macmillan company; London, Macmillan & co., ltd., 1917) at 186.

<sup>22</sup> Walter Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (New York: The Macmillan company; London, Macmillan & co., ltd., 1917) at 245-258.

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righteousness. But it remains that it is individuals who are saved into the Kingdom of God.

Third, while it is true that the Kingdom of God is to come unto earth,<sup>23</sup> I think the Kingdom is to come by way of individual persons becoming Christ disciples and living transformed lives which express God's Kingdom. Further, the Church as a community of Kingdom people is to reflect and express the earthly reality of the Kingdom of God. This is in contrast to Rauschenbusch's view that the earthly systems and institutions, indeed all of them, are to be transformed into institutions of God's Kingdom.

Fourth, while the notion that God is immanent and near to us is certainly biblical,<sup>24</sup> it does not follow that God's solidarity with humanity is the basis of all of life. It is true that God loves the entire world, but this love is expressed in His common grace and provision to all<sup>25</sup> and in His invitation to everyone to find life in Christ.<sup>26</sup> It is true that God's desire is to *dwell with* His people, as we have seen in the survey of the biblical narrative on the Kingdom of God in Chapter 2. Even so, a few points must be borne in mind: (i) this is only fully realised in the New Jerusalem in the New Heaven and New Earth and not on present earth, which would have "passed away" by then;<sup>27</sup> (ii) it is not a universal brotherhood of Man whereby one and all are automatically included to the Kingdom;<sup>28</sup> sadly, only those whose names are found in Christ's book of life; those who are "unclean", "detestable or false" will never enter this Kingdom.<sup>29</sup> It remains therefore that the deity of Christ is central to the conception of the Kingdom of God espoused in this book.

### ***Evangelicalism vs Liberalism***

Others criticized the social gospel for being theologically liberal. However, as has been observed, "to define the social gospel as liberalism is to miss the mark, for not all

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<sup>23</sup> Matthew 6:10.

<sup>24</sup> Psalm 145:8; Acts 17:27; Hebrews 7:19; 10:22; James 4:8.

<sup>25</sup> Matthew 5:45.

<sup>26</sup> John 3:16.

<sup>27</sup> Revelation 21:3.

<sup>28</sup> C. René Padilla, *Mission Between the Times* (Langham Monographs, 2010) at 207.

<sup>29</sup> Revelation 21:7.

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liberals were social gospelers, and not all social gospelers were liberal. The theology of Walter Rauschenbusch was rooted in evangelical piety”.<sup>30</sup> But what distinguishes the liberals from the evangelicals in the first place? How does one define “evangelical”? I do not purport to attempt a comprehensive or rigorous treatment of this topic, but only offer a superficial sketch here.

What is liberal theology? In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Immanuel Kant’s philosophy influenced many German theologians who then transmitted the ideas to American theological students. Several main philosophical ideas and theological implications were wrought. Kant’s philosophy on epistemology sought to find synthesis between Enlightenment rationalism and empiricism. He argued that knowledge is not the mere reception of truth external to the individual, but the individual’s mind subjectively formulating truths from information received by sense-perception.<sup>31</sup> This consequently led to the rejection of metaphysics. In this light, the Bible was merely a “subjective record of man’s consciousness to God”.<sup>32</sup> The liberal theology which developed from these premises thus elevated subjective experience over revelation. The subjective immanence, rather than the transcendental nature, of God, and the universal fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of Man were key themes in liberal theological thinking. The immanence of God in history and each individual would guarantee progress toward an ideal human order on earth. Humanity need to only improve itself and the social order and institutions to perfectly establish God’s Kingdom on earth, after which Christ would return. This was in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century before World War I, the Great Depression of 1929 and subsequently World War II. These events shattered the humanist optimism of liberal theology. What followed was a form of neo-orthodox theology beginning with Søren Kierkegaard and subsequently Karl Barth.

What then is evangelicalism? In terms of etymology, the word “evangelical” finds its root in the “evangel” or “gospel”. The evangelical therefore believes in the Gospel. An

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<sup>30</sup> Ronald Cedric White and Charles Howard Hopkins, *The Social Gospel: Religion and Reform in Changing America* (Temple University Press, 1976) at xvii.

<sup>31</sup> Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy* (Routledge, 2006) at 642; Pasternack, Lawrence and Rossi, Philip, "Kant's Philosophy of Religion", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2014 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2014/entries/kant-religion/>>.

<sup>32</sup> Earle E. Cairns, *Christianity Through The Centuries*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn. (Zondervan, 1996) at 460.

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often-cited definition or criteria for evangelicalism is that proposed by Historian David Bebbington adopted by the U.S.-based National Association of Evangelicals:<sup>33</sup>

“There are four qualities that have been the special marks of Evangelical religion: conversionism, the belief that lives need to be changed; activism, the expression of the gospel in effort; biblicism, a particular regard for the Bible; and what may be termed crucicentrism, a stress on the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. Together they form a quadrilateral of priorities that the basis of Evangelicalism.”

Bebbington’s definition of evangelicalism is based on the revival movements of the 18<sup>th</sup> century associated with the likes of John Wesley and George Whitefield.<sup>34</sup> But this definition is at once too narrow and too broad.

It is narrow because others such as J.I. Packer have argued that evangelicalism is essentially New Testament Christianity, with a tradition running through “Athanasius and Augustine, Martin Luther and John Calvin, Richard Hooker (demonstrably an evangelical) and John Owen, Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield and John Wesley, Charles Spurgeon and John Charles Ryle, Robert Aitken and William Booth, the great Presbyterian theologians of Scotland and North America, the spirituality of the English Puritans and the East African revival, and much, much more”.<sup>35</sup> So to confine evangelicalism to the 18<sup>th</sup> century revival movements would be far too narrow. According to J.I. Packer, what makes an evangelical is “true faith in the real Jesus Christ”.<sup>36</sup>

Further, conversionism in some quarters of the evangelical Church is understood narrowly as a one-time event: for instance, at the point of saying the Sinner’s Prayer. Taking my own journey as an example, I realised that I did not begin to live a life under the Lordship of Christ and as a Kingdom citizen even after saying the Sinner’s Prayer. It was only some time later did my life evidence faith. Some other quarters within the

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<sup>33</sup> David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989), at 2-3.

<sup>34</sup> Timothy Larsen, Daniel J. Treier, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Evangelical Theology* (Cambridge University Press, 2007) at 1.

<sup>35</sup> J. I. Packer, “The Uniqueness of Jesus Christ: Some Evangelical Reflections,” *Churchman* 92 (1978).

<sup>36</sup> J. I. Packer, “The Uniqueness of Jesus Christ: Some Evangelical Reflections,” *Churchman* 92 (1978).

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Church are beginning to revisit the view that conversion, as discipleship, is a process.<sup>37</sup> On this, Jonathan Edwards said:<sup>38</sup>

“Conversion is a great and glorious work of God’s power, at once changing the heart, and infusing life into the dead soul; though the grace then implanted more gradually displays itself in some than in others. But as to fixing on the precise time when they put forth the very first act of grace, there is a great deal of difference in different persons; in some it seems to be very discernible when the very time was; but others are more at a loss. In this respect, there are very many who do not know, even when they have it, that it is the grace of conversion, and sometimes do not think it to be so till a long time after. Many, even when they come to entertain great hopes that they are converted, if they remember what they experienced in the first exercises of grace, they are at a loss whether it was any more than a common illumination; or whether some other more clear and remarkable experience which they had afterwards, was not the first of a saving nature. The manner of God’s work on the soul, sometimes especially is very mysterious; and it is with the Kingdom of God as to its manifestation in the heart of a convert, as is said, in Mark iv. 26, 27, 28.”

On the other hand, the Bebbington four-fold criteria is too broad. At its surface, it does not give weight to whether one believes in a Trinitarian God and Jesus as God Incarnate.<sup>39</sup> If indeed the “evangel” is what the evangelical is concerned with, then what is the content of this gospel? A gospel that anyone who *verbally* professes belief in Jesus Christ will have forgiveness of sins and thereby be entitled to immediate entrance to heaven (“beam me up, Scotty!”)? A hyper-grace gospel that, among other things, as Christians who have received grace, we can no longer sin and displease God? A gospel that says, more faith necessitates more material wealth justifying more enjoyment? A gospel that says everything of the material world should be disregarded? A gospel that focuses solely on compliance with a code of conduct and observance of moral ethics

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<sup>37</sup> Brian Harris, "Beyond Bebbington: The Quest for Evangelical Identity in a Postmodern Era", *Churchman* 122/3 (Autumn 2008) at 205.

<sup>38</sup> Jonathan Edwards, Sereno Edwards Dwight, *Narrative of Surprising Conversions* (1830) at 45.

<sup>39</sup> J. I. Packer, "The Uniqueness of Jesus Christ: Some Evangelical Reflections," *Churchman* 92 (1978).

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without having regard to the heart condition? Perhaps at the end of it, evangelicalism is essentially “passionate piety”.<sup>40</sup>

### *Liberation Theology*

Liberation theology first emerged in Latin America around the 1950s as a reaction to the prevalent social injustice and poverty in Latin American society.<sup>41</sup> One of the monumental works on this is Peruvian Roman Catholic priest Gustavo Gutiérrez’s *Theology of Liberation* (1971). Other influential thinkers on this include Leonardo Boff of Brazil, Jon Sobrino of Spain, and Juan Luis Segundo of Uruguay. Concurrent with Latin American liberation theology emerged an equivalent in the United States around the same time: black theology. An influential thinker and work on this is African-American Protestant theologian James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (1969).<sup>42</sup> Liberation theology evolved and gave rise to other brands such as feminist theology, gay theology and Palestinian liberation theology. Generally, liberation theology emphasises the Exodus narrative and theme throughout the biblical narrative as archetypal of God’s work of liberation of the oppressed in the present times. Liberation theology was criticized and denounced as unorthodox. Latin American liberation theology was subsequently denounced by the Vatican.<sup>43</sup> Leading evangelical thinkers also criticised and sought to dismantle liberation theology.

North and South American liberation theology share several commonalities, which shall be briefly discussed here. First, liberation theology asserts that theology must be arrived at from the starting point of praxis (practice or experience, i.e. participation in the struggle of the oppressed) and with reference to specific historical contexts and

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<sup>40</sup> Brian Harris, "Beyond Bebbington: The Quest for Evangelical Identity in a Postmodern Era", *Churchman* 122/3 (Autumn 2008) at 213.

<sup>41</sup> See generally John Stott & Ajith Fernando, *Christian Mission in the Modern World* (IVP Press, 2009) at 137 onwards; Steven Harris, "Biblical Theology and Liberation", 9marks (20 August 2014): <<http://9marks.org/article/biblical-theology-and-liberation/>>; John Coffey, "'To release the oppressed': Reclaiming a biblical theology of liberation", Jubilee Centre <<http://www.jubilee-centre.org/to-release-the-oppressed-reclaiming-a-biblical-theology-of-liberation-by-john-coffey/>>.

<sup>42</sup> James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation, Fortieth Anniversary Edition* (New York: Orbis Books, 2010).

<sup>43</sup> See e.g. Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI), "Liberation Theology: Preliminary Notes", in *The Ratzinger Report*: <<http://www.christendom-awake.org/pages/ratzinger/liberationtheol.htm>>.

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hermeneutics or biblical interpretation must begin from the perspective of the oppressed. In Latin America, this must be from the perspective of the poor and oppressed. In black liberation theology, this must be the African American people under a white-dominated society. In contrast, I have sought to show in this book thus far that biblical social justice is grounded in a God-centric, Kingdom-centric, Christ-centric hermeneutic of the biblical narrative.

Second, liberation theology evolved into an ideology which was focussed so much on unjust earthly systems and institutions as the root problem of oppression and suffering in the world, and correspondingly liberating oppressed peoples from those systems and institutions that these became the paramount goal and focus of the theological project. For instance, Gutiérrez wrote that “[t]he building of a just society has worth in terms of the Kingdom, or in more current phraseology, to participate in the process of liberation is already in a certain sense a salvific work”. This has been criticized to come at the expense of a biblical view of eschatology, i.e. things concerning our spiritual and ultimate destinies. In contrast, I have sought to show that biblical social justice is premised on the view that sin in fallen humanity is the root cause of oppression and suffering; this may necessarily manifest itself in sinful and unjust earthly systems and institutions, but the central focus is still the sin of individual persons. Further, the ultimate horizon of biblical social justice is not this world but God’s Kingdom which will be fully realised in the world to come when Jesus returns. Unlike liberation theology which promotes liberation for the *sufficient* purpose of creating just societal orders, the conception of biblical social justice espoused in this book is inclusion of the marginalised into God’s *Kingdom community* at the highest.

Third, liberation theology relied heavily on secular ideologies and concepts such that there was a danger of secular ideology becoming the bedrock of the so-called theology. For instance, black liberation theology was influenced by Black Power and Malcolm X and Latin American liberation was influenced by Marxism. Indeed, in the Singapore context, liberation theology is especially sensitive because of its connection with the “Marxist Conspiracy” and Operation Spectrum in 1987, during which the Internal Security Department detained 16 persons connected to the Roman Catholic Church-related Young Christian Workers’ Movement, the Geylang Catholic Welfare Centre, etc. for allegedly participating in subversive activities to establish a communist state in

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Singapore.<sup>44</sup> In contrast, I have sought to show how biblical social justice is founded upon and an integral facet of the larger narrative of God's Kingdom and derived from orthodox biblical exegesis.

In the final analysis, one must look at the substance beyond the form. It is easy to throw labels and terms like "social gospel" and "liberation theology", but every thought, idea or theology must ultimately be parsed through a Spirit-led biblical hermeneutics. It is important for each of us to be clear about the essential truth of *the Gospel* as expressed in the Bible, being the authoritative revealed Word of God. Returning to the point of this section, it is hoped that I have showed how the views on social justice expressed in this book are biblical and congruous with the biblical Gospel. (And if there be any concern that social justice is antithetical to the Reformed mind, check out a video of one of the chief proponents of Reformed theology, John Piper, talking about social justice on The Gospel Coalition!<sup>45</sup>)

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<sup>44</sup> "16 are arrested for Marxist Conspiracy: 21st May 1987", HistorySG: <<http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/history/events/78426a95-7114-4a12-be92-5d4d7ce40cca>>; Jagjit Kaur, "Marxist conspiracy", Singapore Infopedia, National Library Board (2009): <[http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP\\_1578\\_2009-10-31.html](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_1578_2009-10-31.html)>.

<sup>45</sup> "Social Justice and Young Evangelicals: Encouragement and Concern", The Gospel Coalition (28 August 2013): <<http://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/social-justice-and-young-evangelicals-encouragement-and-concern>>.



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## 7. What's distinctive about the Christian view of justice? -- Principles of Biblical Justice

### **A. Empowerment and Capacity Building**

It is helpful to draw from social work literature on the concepts and framework of empowerment and capacity building. Firstly, empowerment may be defined as “the capacity of individuals, groups and/or communities to take control of their circumstances, exercise power and achieve their own goals, and the process by which, individually and collectively, they are able to help themselves and others to maximize the quality of their lives”.<sup>46</sup> Empowerment entails:<sup>47</sup>

- the individual's or community's participation in the service or care process;
- promoting an individual's or community's self-management of his / their circumstances;
- critical reflexivity on personal experiences for future decision-making;
- increasing consciousness of the individual's or community's context of his / their problems and developing ways to address them.

Promoting the individual's or community's participation is preferable because:<sup>48</sup>

- they will gain from participating in the process;
- it will help to better identify their needs and the nature of solutions to meet them;
- the solutions will be more inclusive;
- participation is itself critical to forging relationships and community;
- their interpersonal and social skills will improve, and people will learn more democratic ways of working.

### **D. Biblical Justice and Contemporary Theories of Justice**

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<sup>46</sup> Robert Adams, *Empowerment, Participation and Social Work*, 4<sup>th</sup> edn. (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) at 17.

<sup>47</sup> Robert Adams, *Empowerment, Participation and Social Work*, 4<sup>th</sup> edn. (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) at 18-21.

<sup>48</sup> Adapted from Robert Adams, *Empowerment, Participation and Social Work*, 4<sup>th</sup> edn. (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) at 32.

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## *John Rawls' A Theory of Justice*

One of the most influential modern philosophers on distributive justice is John Rawls. In *A Theory of Justice* (1971),<sup>49</sup> later updated in *Political Liberalism* (1993),<sup>50</sup> he conceived a comprehensive political theory of socio-economic and political distributive justice. It's important to understand that this theory is a political theory: it sets out a normative vision for how a political nation should be structured. Also, it seeks to address two main principles and problems: equality and liberty. His theory is a theory of political liberalism. Why are equality and liberty problems? The premise to liberalism is that every individual should be free to pursue his own conception of the good life. The first main problem is that individuals inevitably conflict when exercising their respective freedoms. The other main problem is that in reality, humanity is plagued with inequalities of the human condition and resources. Equality is in theory a good thing, but to what extent? Strict equality would require every individual to have the exact same resources. But that would be inconsistent with the principle of liberty. Rawl's theory thus attempts to address these problems. Rawl's theory is a social contract theory which may be summed up in two principles:

1. Each person is to have an equal right to a fully adequate scheme of equal basic liberties consistent with a similar scheme of liberties for others;<sup>51</sup>
2. Social and economic inequalities are permissible only if they satisfy two conditions:
  - a. The inequalities are attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity; and
  - b. They must be to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged members of society.<sup>52</sup>

Rawls derived these principles from a hypothetical social contract, achieved through a thought experiment. Imagine all the citizens of a community are gathered together and planning a framework for their future society (terms the original position).

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<sup>49</sup> John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Harvard University Press, 1999).

<sup>50</sup> John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (Columbia University Press, 1993).

<sup>51</sup> The "fully adequate scheme" was originally "most extensive scheme".

<sup>52</sup> The "great benefit" condition was originally "greatest benefit".

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They are behind a “veil of ignorance” as to what individual lot they will have in life in that society: what race, sex, social class, talents, personal characteristics, etc. From the premise that these individuals are all primarily self-interested, Rawls argued that these individuals would adopt his principles so that, when the “veil of ignorance” is lifted, as a basic guarantee, even if they should have the worst lot in society, they would still be able to exercise their “moral powers” to pursue their ideas of a good life.<sup>53</sup>

For our present purposes, the second principle, consisting of the “fair equality of opportunity” principle and the “difference principle”, deserves close attention because it is a socio-economic redistribution principle. It seeks to redistribute resources and public goods in a society in a particular way. It should be noted that Rawls’ theory requires that that principles are prioritized “lexically” i.e. the first principle is highest priority, followed by principle 2(a), then 2(b) in that order.

In the light of our above discussion on principles of biblical justice, a brief comment may be made on Rawls’ theory. biblical justice is indeed redistributive. The Jubilee Law mandatorily redistributes economic resources every 50 years to ensure inter-generational equity and equality of opportunity. This accords with the equality of opportunity principle. However, the Rawlsian difference principle, *in its original form*, is too broad and vague. It potentially justifies redistributing resources and public goods as hand-outs within a welfare state system. A welfare state system is not in itself objectionable. It could however be objectionable in practice if it results in undignified and irresponsible dependency. The aim of biblical justice is not to further entrench the socio-economically disadvantaged in their status but to enable them to fully participate in their communities as working, social, worshipping individuals. However, in his subsequent work, *Justice as Fairness (2001)*,<sup>54</sup> Rawls clarified and argued that a welfare state would violate his principles of justice: welfare state capitalism merely provides a baseline standard which does not ensure all citizens sufficient resources to have equal opportunities to exercise certain political rights or access offices and positions with

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<sup>53</sup> Maimon Schwarzschild, "Constitutional Law and Equality" in Dennis Patterson, ed., *A Companion to Philosophy of Law and Legal Theory*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2010) CH. 9 at 169.

<sup>54</sup> John Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement* (Harvard University Press, 2001).

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positive social or economic inequalities.<sup>55</sup> Further, welfare state capitalism maintains the state where a small part of society controls the economy and indirectly political life.<sup>56</sup> Rawls argues that his political theory would favour either a property owning democracy or democratic socialism. Either political economic systems would enable all citizens to manage their own affairs within significant (but not necessarily substantial) social and economic equality.<sup>57</sup> Rawls further argues against *ex-post* redistribution but prefers broad-based distribution of initial holdings:<sup>58</sup>

“Property-owning democracy avoids this, not by the redistribution of income to those with less at the end of each period, so to speak, but rather by ensuring the widespread ownership of assets and human capital (that is, education and trained skills) at the beginning of each period, all this against a background of fair equality of opportunity. The intent is not simply to assist those who lose out through accident or misfortune (although that must be done), but rather to put all citizens in a position to manage their own affairs on a footing of a suitable degree of social and economic equality.”

It appears therefore that the Rawlsian theory is congruous with the Jubilee Law’s scheme of redistribution of initial holdings for each new generation dispersed over all families and clans. The following statement he makes also resonates with biblical justice: “[t]he least advantaged are not, if all goes well, the unfortunate and unlucky—objects of our charity and compassion, much less our pity—but those to whom reciprocity is owed as a matter of basic justice”.<sup>59</sup> This is not to say that the Christian should be inclined to adopt wholesale Rawl’s theory along with its underlying premises and goals.<sup>60</sup> There

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<sup>55</sup> John Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement* (Harvard University Press, 2001) at 137-140.

<sup>56</sup> John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Harvard University Press, 1999) at 245-247.

<sup>57</sup> Wenar, Leif, "John Rawls", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2013 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2013/entries/rawls/>>.

<sup>58</sup> John Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement* (Harvard University Press, 2001) at 139; see also Thad Williamson and Martin O'Neill, "Property-Owning Democracy and the Demands of Justice", *Living Reviews in Democracy*, Vol 1 (2009).

<sup>59</sup> John Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement* (Harvard University Press, 2001) at 139.

<sup>60</sup> It is of interest to note that John Rawls was a Christian and in his undergraduate years, wrote a thesis entitled, "A Brief Inquiry into the Meaning of Sin and Faith". He changed his mind about the faith after World War II: Jerome C. Foss, "John Rawls: Theorist of Modern Liberalism", *The Heritage Foundation, Makers of American Political Thought*, No. 12 (13 August 2014).

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remains various points for critique, which I will not go into detail here.<sup>61</sup> I will discuss additional comments further below.

### ***Ronald Dworkin's equality of resources***

Legal philosopher Ronald Dworkin made a further contribution to the ideas of distributive justice, building on John Rawls. Instead of founding his theory on a hypothetical social contract, his premise was that each person should be given an equality of resources to meet the ethical challenges that each person sets for himself in life. And freedom is necessary to ensure such equality so that people can discuss and develop their own ideas of the good life in order for the resources to be distributed equally. Dworkin's further contribution is that he thinks equality of resources means that resources should be distributed such as to address people's unequal talents and luck at the onset. However, once everyone has received an equal initial bundle of resources, people are then bound by the outcome of the decisions they make.<sup>62</sup>

### ***Human Capabilities: Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum***

Subsequent to Rawls, philosophers such as Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum offered an alternative paradigm: equality of capabilities.<sup>63</sup> This is the view that society should ensure that each person has the necessary capacity or capability to exercise freedom to achieve the goals that the person considers valuable. They argue that the aim of the liberal society should not be equality of *welfare* because to do so would be to preconceive what welfare is for everyone, precluding certain potential visions of what constitutes the good life. They also argue against equality of *resources* because the value of resources differ widely depending on one's natural and social situations,

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<sup>61</sup> Some critiques include the idea that Rawls's theory ignores inequalities that are deserving because of people's choices.

<sup>62</sup> Ronald Dworkin, *Sovereign Virtue: The Theory and Practice of Equality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000); Maimon Schwarzschild, "Constitutional Law and Equality" in Dennis Patterson, ed., *A Companion to Philosophy of Law and Legal Theory*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2010) CH. 9 at 170-171.

<sup>63</sup> Martha Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development* (Cambridge University Press, 2000); Amartya Sen, *The Idea of Justice* (Allen Lane, 2009); Maimon Schwarzschild, "Constitutional Law and Equality" in Dennis Patterson, ed., *A Companion to Philosophy of Law and Legal Theory*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2010) CH. 9 at 171-173.

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especially for instance, people with physical, mental or social handicaps. To put it simplistically, giving everyone a fishing rod to fish would not be helpful for a mentally challenged person. What the latter person needs is empowered with capability to pursue the life he so desires. Further, Amartya Sen critiques Rawls' and Dworkins' theory for being abstract, being what he calls "transcendental institutionalist" approaches of justice.<sup>64</sup> One problem with such approaches is that it requires a certain sequential progression: the State has to develop up to a certain level before it can establish these just social institutions; in many developing countries, this will take decades. Instead of focusing on what is an ideal just social institution (since agreeing on a transcendental definition of justice has proven to be highly contentious), he argues that we achieve justice by reducing injustice, by reducing handicaps and enabling people.

### ***Peter Singer's The Life You Can Save and Effective Altruism***

Peter Singer is an Australian moral philosopher who is a professor at Princeton University specialising in applied ethics. In his 2009 book *The Life You Can Save*<sup>65</sup> and more recently in his 2015 book, *The Most Good You Can Do*,<sup>66</sup> he makes moral arguments on why people in richer nations should donate money to charities to end poverty in developing nations. While Singer's theory in this regard is not a theory of justice as it were, it is a theory on charity and doing good and is worth our consideration given its overlap with the matters addressed in this chapter.

Singer constructs his philosophical argument as follows:

1. suffering and death from lack of food, shelter, and medical care are bad;
2. if it is in your power to prevent something bad from happening, without sacrificing anything nearly as important, it is wrong not to do so;
3. by donating to aid agencies, you can prevent suffering from lack of food, shelter, and medical care, without sacrificing anything nearly as important;

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<sup>64</sup> Amartya Sen, *The Idea of Justice* (Allen Lane, 2009) at 262-268.

<sup>65</sup> Peter Singer, *The Life You Can Save: Acting Now to End World Poverty* (Random House, 2009).

<sup>66</sup> Peter Singer, *The Most Good You Can Do: How Effective Altruism Is Changing Ideas About Living Ethically* (Yale University Press, 2015).

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4. therefore, if you do not donate to aid agencies, you are doing something wrong.<sup>67</sup>

Singer also draws on religious traditions including Jewish and Christian ones in support of his case. He cites Thomas Aquinas and Ambrose's *Decretum Gratiani*: "The bread which you withhold belongs to the hungry; the clothing you shut away, to the naked; and the money you bury in the earth is the redemption and freedom of the penniless".<sup>68</sup>

Singer examines 6 psychological arguments against giving, which he believes can be refuted by rational persuasion.<sup>69</sup>

1. The Identifiable Victim. People will do more to save a single, identifiable individual than they will do to save a group, especially when they have a picture of that person.
2. Parochialism. People are more likely to help their family, friends, and countrymen.
3. Futility. "In general, the smaller the proportion of people at risk who can be saved the less willing people are to send aid".
4. The Diffusion of Responsibility. We are less likely to help if others who are also in a position to help aren't doing anything.
5. The Sense of Fairness. People are less likely to help if they think that that would be doing more than their fair share.
6. Money. Money makes people less helpful.

More recently, Singer, along with others,<sup>70</sup> makes an argument for effective altruism, a philosophical and social movement that seeks to consider the optimal ways to

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<sup>67</sup> Peter Singer, *The Life You Can Save: Acting Now to End World Poverty* (Random House, 2009) at 15-16.

<sup>68</sup> See also Peter Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality", *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, vol. 1, no. 1 (Spring 1972), pp. 229-243.

<sup>69</sup> Peter Singer, *The Life You Can Save: Acting Now to End World Poverty* (Random House, 2009) at 46-59.

<sup>70</sup> E.g. William MacAskill, *Doing Good Better: How Effective Altruism Can Help You Make a Difference* (Gotham, 2015); Larissa MacFarquhar, *Strangers Drowning: Grappling with Impossible Idealism, Drastic Choices, and the Overpowering Urge to Help* (Penguin Press, 2015); Nick Cooney, *How To Be Great At*

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achieve the greatest positive impact. This movement encourages evidence-based prioritization of causes and the assessment of amount of impact from monetary donations.

### *Other theories of justice*

Post-modern critical theorists critique the liberal egalitarianism of Rawls and Dworkin by arguing that the equalities aimed at would merely result in the acquisition of unequal power and becomes sources of sexual, racial or class oppression (a common theme in post-modern critical discourse). Equality is meaningless because it cannot be properly articulated or conceived among the disadvantaged and powerless. Instead, the solution is to listen to the powerless, give them voice and empower them.

Another political philosopher Michael Walzer in his book *Spheres of Justice*,<sup>71</sup> offers another paradigm to justice. Walzer argues that the ultimate goal which is often sought as a matter of justice is really freedom from domination. For him, this is best achieved by recognising that there are different spheres of life, and in each sphere, it should be ensured that there are opportunities for dignity and success. This is “complex equality”: everyone need not pursue the same level of dignity or success in every or any sphere. Instead, each can have an opportunity to achieve dignity or success in one or other spheres of life. In this respect, Walzer delineates 11 social goods: (1) membership in the community, (2) security and welfare, (3) money and commodities, (4) office, (5) hard work—jobs that nobody wants to do in society, (6) free time, (7) education, (8) kinship and love (family), (9) divine grace, (10) recognition, and (11) political power. Justice then is when members of the community understand these social goods, how they relate to one another through these social goods and develop a diversity of criteria that mirrors the diversity of the social goods. Every social good should then be shared according to that criteria appropriate for it, independently of the distribution of all other social goods. Each person is free to pursue his own goals within each sphere. There

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*Doing Good: Why Results Are What Count and How Smart Charity Can Change the World* (Jossey-Bass, 2015).

<sup>71</sup> Michael Walzer, *Spheres of Justice: A Defense of Pluralism and Equality* (New York: Basic Books, 1983).



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should be sufficient boundaries drawn between each sphere so that domination in one sphere does not necessarily result in domination in another sphere. This way, there is no power build-up. For instance, having large amounts of money and commodities should not necessarily mean large amounts of political power.

### *Some thoughts on contemporary theories of justice*

At this juncture, I offer a few brief thoughts on the contemporary theories of justice discussed above in the light of our earlier discussion on principles of biblical justice. At the outset, it is clear that these contemporary theories are similarly concerned with the wellbeing of the less advantaged. In Rawl's theory, this is addressed by the difference principle. In Dworkin's, the equality of resources goal seeks to redistribute resources to enable the less advantaged to pursue the goals they set for themselves. In Sen's and Nussbaum's, it is to empower the less advantaged in terms of human capabilities. Likewise Walzer and the critical theorists.

However, it should be noted that most of these theories are political theories of the state. They broadly sketch out a certain form of political economy, which concerns the relationship between the state and its citizens. It does not purport to address social justice at the community and personal level. Perhaps it is here where it is most lacking.

Most of these political theories assume that solutions to achieve some form of ideals of justice are to be addressed by way of establishing just institutions and systems. The problem with that mode of thinking is that it sorely neglects the reality that ultimately, it is human beings who set up, run, lead, control, and are beneficiaries of, these institutions. George Orwell's satire, *Animal Farm*, is an accurate depiction of human nature and its relationship with ideological projects which seek to achieve just social orders. Ideological endeavours to achieve just social orders fail because human beings, inherently sinful, will always have a tendency to accumulate power and exploit it to their own advantage. This is not to say that *every* human being when given the opportunity will do so. It suffices that many will. There is no limit to human creativity. Neither is there a limit to people wielding that creativity to their self-interest at the expense of others. An example is the treatment of the Dalits or "untouchables" caste in India. Legislation to prohibit discrimination and protect the Dalits have been enacted since the 1950s. Today,

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the Dalits continue to face discrimination.<sup>72</sup> For instance, the police would subject Dalit communities to violent search and seizure operations, exert sexual violence on Dalit women, allow, abet and/or collude with private actors in committing atrocities. In the distribution of disaster relief aid in the wake of the Gujarat earthquake in January 2001 and the Indian Ocean tsunami in December 2004, the Dalits were discriminated in receiving aid. The problem is a multi-faceted one involving cultural, social, legal and systemic factors.

Yet, at the heart of it, I believe it is human sinfulness which most accurately accounts for these many factors. So while just social institutions are necessary, it is also necessary to have *just people*. Even so, biblical justice does not offer comprehensive social political theories to make people just.<sup>73</sup> It is ultimately the Gospel of God's Kingdom which can make people just.

Biblical justice does offer alternative paradigms to look at the problem of injustice. It offers both a top-down and a bottoms-up approach. Here, a comparison with Sen's and Nussbaum's bottoms-up approach might be appropriate. The latter posit that the aim should be to reduce injustice by mitigating handicaps and disabilities, and improving human capabilities so that people can pursue the lives they so desire. However, the proposed solution still lies in the State. And the problem with that is it assumes sufficient political will, resources and non-corruption. Even if the solution is extended to apply to entities other than the State, it does not offer an imperative for individuals and communities to adopt and pursue the solution. Biblical justice seeks to address the problem from both top-down (for instance by having redistributive policies to ensure equal opportunities and resources at the start of each generation) as well as bottom-up (by empowering individuals to take ownership of their circumstances, and mandating that other people assist them within relational and communal contexts). And biblical justice draws its imperative from the ethic of love and covenantal faithfulness. Further, the

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<sup>72</sup> See Centre for Human Rights and Global Justice and Human Rights Watch, "Hidden Apartheid: Caste Discrimination against India's "Untouchables" Shadow Report to the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination", February 2007 Volume 19, No. 3 (C); A. Ramaiah, "Growing crimes against Dalits in India despite special laws", South Asia @ LSE (28 May 2013).

<sup>73</sup> This is not to say that God's Word has nothing to say about political systems; indeed, it does but it is best left to be the subject of another enterprise.

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Christian is not only obliged to merely love fellow Christians, but also every person in need.

While Peter Singer's moral argument exhorting people to donate their expendable income effectively is persuasive and noble, it is unfortunately limited and misses the crux of the justice problem. This is because Singer's moral argument is founded in the abstract and calls people to the impersonal: simply give disposable income to the most effective charities; it doesn't matter that the donor does not live a just life. It sub-contracts the relational and community aspects of justice to professionals, leaving the donors to stand apart and aloof from the marginalised.

Singer's philosophy also misses the crux of the justice problem because it does not deal with the *sin* problem, as would be expected since it is a non-theistic philosophy. Without dealing with the sin problem, it would be a vicious cycle of money thrown into charitable institutions to do good, followed by sin-wrecked people reversing the good done and perpetuating further injustice. Sin-marred people will continue to support, maintain and perpetuate sin-wrecked institutions and systems. This only leads to futility and nihilism. Biblical justice on the other hand focuses squarely on the issue of sin. Even if Singer would say, under Effective Altruism, we do seek to reform systems, societies and people albeit this should be left to the professionals, this again stands in contrast to an important biblical truth. Which is that just communities and people are built and transformed when they are transformed by grace to commit to justice.

Further, while the Effective Altruism movement is founded on good intentions, it is not altogether congruous with the Christian worldview. This is because God often makes foolish the wisdom of the world to reveal His power and glory. God's leading and direction for practitioners of biblical justice sometimes lead them to do things which may appear unwise or inefficient in terms of quantitative impact. But in God's economy, efficiency is second place to specific, deep qualitative impact. This is the extravagant grace of God. In Luke 15:4, Jesus tells a parable of a shepherd who would leave behind 99 sheep in the open country to go after 1 who is lost. The numbers and the risks do not make sense. But God does this to extend His amazing grace. And God is the God of the 5 loaves and 2 fishes which were more than sufficient to feed the crowd of more than 5,000. This must be the important distinctive of the Spirit-led justice practitioner. The Christian justice

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practitioner follows a supernatural God who is much more eager than her to do justice and to display His glory and awesomeness.

Singer's philosophy is also emotionally burdensome and practically unfeasible. His argument posits that those who fail to give money are morally wrong; this leads to shame and guilt, something which American journalist Nicholas Kristof has also noted.<sup>74</sup> In the biblical framework, all who fail to live just and righteous lives have in Christ had their justice demand turned into grace-fuelled worship. There can be no guilt and shame. Singer's philosophy is also practically unfeasible because as philosopher Thomas Nagel has commented, nobody in reality gives up all their possessions which are more valuable than the cost of preventing human suffering.<sup>75</sup> As Nicholas Kristof also asks, "where do we draw the line?"<sup>76</sup> The logical conclusion to Singer's moral argument is practically untenable for most people. What's different under the Christian worldview? As Christians, we must have the genuine heart attitude that our entire lives have been surrendered to God. There is no line to be drawn, as it were. But God in His grace nevertheless continues to provide us with abundant material provisions as a matter of *stewardship*. So we can leave the justice demand, the issues of what and how much, to the sovereign all-knowing God. We trust the Holy Spirit to lead us to steward to the best we can.

Moving away from Singer, in juxtaposition to post-modern critical theorists' suggestion to be the empathetic listening ear to the disadvantaged so as to give them voice and empower them, biblical justice also embraces that, but does not allow things to remain at that. After listening to the needs and struggles of the disadvantaged, it still has to be determined what is objectively good and right for them to pursue. Of course, what is deemed to be good and right may be contested. And biblical justice necessarily involves relying on the truth of God's Word.

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<sup>74</sup> Nicholas Kristof, "The Trader Who Donates Half His Pay", NY Times (4 April 2015): <[http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/05/opinion/sunday/nicholas-kristof-the-trader-who-donates-half-his-pay.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/05/opinion/sunday/nicholas-kristof-the-trader-who-donates-half-his-pay.html?_r=0)>.

<sup>75</sup> Thomas Nagel, "What Peter Singer Wants of You", The New York Review of Books (25 March 2010).

<sup>76</sup> Nicholas Kristof, "The Trader Who Donates Half His Pay", NY Times (4 April 2015): <[http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/05/opinion/sunday/nicholas-kristof-the-trader-who-donates-half-his-pay.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/05/opinion/sunday/nicholas-kristof-the-trader-who-donates-half-his-pay.html?_r=0)>.

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## C. Principles of Biblical Justice

### *History of Pro Bono Legal Advocacy*

To deny access to *legal* justice is a form of *social* injustice. That is not to say that 'justice' is 'law'.<sup>77</sup> But in a modern context where the bureaucratic State regulates most of our lives through the law, *de facto* disability to access the law breeds injustice. After all, it is often the case that the socio-economically weaker parties are practically denied of their legal rights either because they do not know their rights or do not have the resources to enforce their legal rights. The end result is that the individual does not enjoy the substantive socio-economic or political right. Isaiah 10:1-2 is clear: "Woe to those who decree iniquitous decrees, and the writers who keep writing oppression, *to turn aside the needy from justice and to rob the poor of my people of their right*". Hence, access to 'law' becomes a proxy to access to 'justice'. Yet it is severely curtailed because the prices of law-related services often exclude a large fraction of society from access to law and justice. State-funded legal aid necessarily avails only to a small fraction of the society,<sup>78</sup> hence the need for *pro bono* legal services.

The history of pro bono legal aid and representation has a solid Christian heritage in the Western legal tradition.<sup>79</sup> Under the Roman legal system, the services of the *advocati* (more orators than lawyers) were accessible to the poor through a patronage system, where a person of higher socio-economic status could in effect pay the cost for

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<sup>77</sup> For the different aspects of the 'access to justice' movement, see: Ronald Sackville, "Some Thoughts on Access to Justice" (2004) 2 N.Z. J. Pub. & Int'l L. 85; Christine Parker, "Access to Justice" in *Just Lawyers: Regulation and Access to Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) Ch. 3; Stephen Bottomley and Simon Bronitt, *Law in Context 4<sup>th</sup> edn.* (NSW, Sydney: The Federation Press, 2012) Ch. 5.

<sup>78</sup> Report of the Legal Aid Review Committee of the Law Society of Singapore (October 2006) at 52: the Singapore Legal Aid Bureau's present disposable income means limits is approximately equivalent to the 21<sup>st</sup> to the 30<sup>th</sup> percentile, *i.e.* households above the 30<sup>th</sup> percentile in Singapore will not qualify for legal aid; there is thus a large 'sandwich' class who cannot qualify for legal aid but also cannot afford legal services or court fees.

<sup>79</sup> Donald Robertson, "Pro Bono as a Professional Legacy" in Christopher Arup and Kathy Laster, *For the Public Good: Pro Bono and the Legal Profession in Australia* (NSW: The Federation Press, 2001) 97; J.A. Brundage, "Legal Aid for the Poor and the Professionalization of Law in the Middle Ages" (1988) 9 *Journal of Legal History* 169.

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the poor person's use of *advocati* services,<sup>80</sup> who would eventually pay in kind, e.g. agricultural produce.<sup>81</sup> Often in litigation, the party of low socio-economic status would be severely disadvantaged against the one of high status, although formally, Roman citizens were supposed to enjoy equality before the law,<sup>82</sup> and patronage was often subject to corruption.<sup>83</sup>

The Christianisation of Western Europe changed the moral and social climate. The Christian faith emphasised seeking justice for the marginalized, hence the early Church especially took care of and sought justice for the poor.<sup>84</sup> In 451 A.D., "the Council of Chalcedon formalized church policy on legal aid for the poor ... clergymen ... [could and should] furnish legal counsel and representation to widows, orphans, and those who lacked resources of their own".<sup>85</sup> In the post-Constantine Christian European 'states', secular and ecclesiastical authorities and jurisdictions overlapped, so it was possible for the Church lawyers and judges to operate in both.<sup>86</sup>

By the mid-13<sup>th</sup> century, the Christian influence of 'charity' (*agape*, i.e. sacrificial love) and mercy had permeated through the legal system.<sup>87</sup> Provision of legal aid was

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<sup>80</sup> Donald Robertson, "Pro Bono as a Professional Legacy" in Christopher Arup and Kathy Laster, *For the Public Good: Pro Bono and the Legal Profession in Australia* (NSW: The Federation Press, 2001) 97 at 99-100.

<sup>81</sup> Donald Robertson, "Pro Bono as a Professional Legacy" in Christopher Arup and Kathy Laster, *For the Public Good: Pro Bono and the Legal Profession in Australia* (NSW: The Federation Press, 2001) 97 at 99-100.

<sup>82</sup> Donald Robertson, "Pro Bono as a Professional Legacy" in Christopher Arup and Kathy Laster, *For the Public Good: Pro Bono and the Legal Profession in Australia* (NSW: The Federation Press, 2001) 97 at 100-101.

<sup>83</sup> Donald Robertson, "Pro Bono as a Professional Legacy" in Christopher Arup and Kathy Laster, *For the Public Good: Pro Bono and the Legal Profession in Australia* (NSW: The Federation Press, 2001) 97 at 102.

<sup>84</sup> Donald Robertson, "Pro Bono as a Professional Legacy" in Christopher Arup and Kathy Laster, *For the Public Good: Pro Bono and the Legal Profession in Australia* (NSW: The Federation Press, 2001) 97 at 103.

<sup>85</sup> J.A. Brundage, "Legal Aid for the Poor and the Professionalization of Law in the Middle Ages" (1988) 9 *Journal of Legal History* 169 at 169.

<sup>86</sup> Donald Robertson, "Pro Bono as a Professional Legacy" in Christopher Arup and Kathy Laster, *For the Public Good: Pro Bono and the Legal Profession in Australia* (NSW: The Federation Press, 2001) 97 at 103.

<sup>87</sup> Donald Robertson, "Pro Bono as a Professional Legacy" in Christopher Arup and Kathy Laster, *For the Public Good: Pro Bono and the Legal Profession in Australia* (NSW: The Federation Press, 2001) 97 at 104.

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regarded as both civic and religious obligation.<sup>88</sup> Thus in medieval Europe, lawyers were paid for from the public treasury.<sup>89</sup> There were municipal statutes obliging advocates to provide legal aid to the poor without compensation.<sup>90</sup>

With such a rich heritage and tradition of Christian charitable legal advocacy, Christian professionals should pause to ponder on their role as Christian advocates and solicitors. Are we able to be like Job and “[take] up the case of the stranger”?<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Donald Robertson, “Pro Bono as a Professional Legacy” in Christopher Arup and Kathy Laster, *For the Public Good: Pro Bono and the Legal Profession in Australia* (NSW: The Federation Press, 2001) 97.

<sup>89</sup> Donald Robertson, “Pro Bono as a Professional Legacy” in Christopher Arup and Kathy Laster, *For the Public Good: Pro Bono and the Legal Profession in Australia* (NSW: The Federation Press, 2001) 97.

<sup>90</sup> Donald Robertson, “Pro Bono as a Professional Legacy” in Christopher Arup and Kathy Laster, *For the Public Good: Pro Bono and the Legal Profession in Australia* (NSW: The Federation Press, 2001) 97.

<sup>91</sup> Job 29:16.

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### 8. Should our ideas of social justice be brought into society? -- *Justice and Righteousness in the Public Square*

#### **Ethics of Civil Dialogue**

In a workshop on civil dialogue I conducted, I made people attempt to have a conversation on a controversial issue. However, I gave different instructions to different participants. I told those in Group 1 to keep asserting their views without listening; Group 2 to not try to comprehend his or her interlocutor, but to assume what he or she would say and respond to those suppositions; Group 3 to only listen and not offer any substantive views, and if need be, ask more clarification questions to elicit more answers from the other; Group 4 to assert points which do not make logical sense, using only Christian jargon and quoting only from the Bible. After the activity, the participants expressed how they felt: (i) the conversation was futile; (ii) people were 'shouting' and not conversing; (iii) people were starting to get emotional and irrational; (iv) the conversation was frustrating; (v) the other participants (in their role playing) were annoying; (vi) the conversation felt contrived and forced; (vii) in a sense the participants could not be honest.

The activity and the responses from the participants in the same for me affirm my view that there are certain principles which should generally be present in order to have ideal civil dialogue. I propose the following:

1. Egalitarian participation.
2. Respectful to all participants.
  - a. Humility.
  - b. Honesty.
  - c. Listening rather than only asserting.
  - d. Comprehending rather than assuming.
  - e. Giving and receiving.
  - f. Well thought out views, positions, interests, and reasons.
3. Voluntary / non-coercive.
4. Accessible language or public reason.
5. Shared social context and/or information insofar as necessary for the subject matter of dialogue.
6. Amenability of participants to changing their views or positions.



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Civil dialogue which lacks any of these is not necessarily defective. However, I think these elements of ideal civil dialogue are necessary for *legitimacy* to cloak the dialogue, and to arise from the dialogue. Legitimacy is an important but complex concept. It is that which makes something acceptable and/or binding. Generally, it justifies obedience. In some contexts, it justifies, additionally, coercion.

Two points of elaboration are merited. First, universal egalitarian participation is rooted in Judeo-Christian ethics. Various (even non-Christian) philosophers have admitted as much.<sup>92</sup> Habermas said:<sup>93</sup>

“Egalitarian universalism, from which sprang the ideas of freedom and social solidarity, of an autonomous conduct of life and emancipation, of the individual morality of conscience, human rights and democracy, is the direct heir of the Judaic ethic of justice and the Christian ethic of love.”

Secondly, accessible language, or the concept in political philosophy of ‘public reason’.<sup>94</sup> If we are to engage in the public square and dialogue with people who have different worldviews, sources of authority and epistemic premises, how can we communicate ours? We need to speak the same language. We need to offer reasons and arguments which are comprehensible to others. If possible, we should rely on epistemic and information resources which are not only universally accessible but actually shared by other participants. Even so, we must be wise about when to appeal to, or utilize, certain resources for certain claims. For instance, when making empirical-truth claims, we must rely on objectively verifiable data; in sincerity or honesty claims, we may rely on anecdotal subjective accounts including our subjective faith encounters. The Church Fathers from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century onwards, from Clement of Alexandria to Origen and the Cappadocian Fathers (Basil the Great and Gregory of Nyssa), affirmed the study of Greek literature as preparatory to understanding the gospel and making it possible for the

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<sup>92</sup> E.g. [http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/03/what-scares-the-new-atheists?CMP=fb\\_gu](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/03/what-scares-the-new-atheists?CMP=fb_gu).

<sup>93</sup> “A Conversation About God and the World” in Jurgen Habermas, *Time of Transitions* (Polity Press, 2006) at 105: see [http://www.habermasforum.dk/index.php?type=news&text\\_id=451](http://www.habermasforum.dk/index.php?type=news&text_id=451).

<sup>94</sup> See John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

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church to engage theologically and transform the values of their society.<sup>95</sup> Indeed, it was noted that as the early Christians began to assert ownership of the cultural and intellectual property of their pagan opponents, the pagans came to see them as a formidable threat which they tried to marginalise but could not.<sup>96</sup> Paul's speech to the Council of Areopagus in Acts 17 is often cited as a sample of such ideal 'public reasoning':

1. Paul adopted the style and methodology of the Greek-Roman philosophers (indeed, it has been suggested that Luke's description of Paul's engagement in the marketplace and then in Areopagus was meant to allude to Socrates and further as a metaphor to depict Christianity as the best manifestation of, and a superior philosophy to, Hellenistic philosophy);<sup>97</sup>
2. Paul knew his philosophy and literature, citing from two Greek poets, masterly weaving his own worldview into his arguments as both coherent with, juxtaposed against, and superior to, the precedent Hellenistic philosophies;
3. Paul also used the historical narrative of the altar "to an unknown God" as a common ground or shared social information or context in order to introduce the rest of his views;
4. Paul was respectful—even though the many idols in Athens were probably an affront to him, he used neutral language to describe that fact ("I see that in every way you are very religious").

The ethics of dialogue is just as important as the subject matter of the dialogue. The medium is the message. Good ethics is also the message.

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<sup>95</sup> Michael Nai-Chiu Poon, "Christian Social Responsibilities in East Asia" in Michael Nai-Chiu Poon, ed., *Pilgrims and Citizens: Christian Social Engagement in East Asia Today* (ATF Press, 2006) at 101.

<sup>96</sup> Michael Nai-Chiu Poon, "Christian Social Responsibilities in East Asia" in Michael Nai-Chiu Poon, ed., *Pilgrims and Citizens: Christian Social Engagement in East Asia Today* (ATF Press, 2006) at 101.

<sup>97</sup> Joshua W. Jipp, "Paul's Areopagus Speech of Acts 17:16–34 as Both Critique and Propaganda" *JBL* 131, no. 3 (2012) 567-588 at 570-571.

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### Is social justice just a new fad? -- *Social Justice in the History of the Church*

*"In history, a great volume is unrolled for our instruction, drawing the materials of future wisdom from the past errors and infirmities of mankind."*

-- Edmund Burke

*"Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards."*

-- Søren Kierkegaard

#### **A. Nothing new under the sun**

When I was about 6, I thought I had discovered the solution to one of the world's greatest problems. I imagined using the sun's rays to reflect light onto a giant boiler to power a steam turbine. I got really excited and wanted someone to create a model for my invention right away. But when I later realised that there was already such a thing as solar power plants, I got really upset that *someone stole my idea*. I didn't realise how silly I was to think that. Solar technology has been harnessed by people since the 7<sup>th</sup> century B.C.! The Preacher in Ecclesiastes would have a poetic response to my foolishness: "[w]hat has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun".<sup>98</sup>

Apart from avoiding the pitfall of thinking that our insights are novel, studying history is important for many reasons. For example, studying the history of God's people and the Church helps us learn from the past,<sup>99</sup> gives us encouragement,<sup>100</sup> and connects us with the larger eternal community of God's Kingdom people.<sup>101</sup> Blaise Pascal (of Pascal's triangle fame) wrote: "The example of noble deaths such as the Spartans and others hardly move us, for we do not see what good it is to us. But the example of the deaths of Christian martyrs move us, for they are our members, having a common bond

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<sup>98</sup> Ecclesiastes 1:9.

<sup>99</sup> Job 8:8-10; 1 Corinthians 10:11.

<sup>100</sup> Romans 15:4.

<sup>101</sup> Hebrews 13:8.

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with them, so that their devotion inspires us not only by their example, but because we should have the same”.<sup>102</sup>

When we examine the practice of the Church’s history in social justice, it reminds us of the heritage we have in doing likewise. We learn that the modern Christian’s engagement in social justice is neither ‘radical’ nor unorthodox. Instead, it has always been a norm. The neglect or failure to pursue social justice is the anomaly. In this chapter, I highlight various influential Christian individuals throughout history who have lived justly and shown mercy in accordance with God’s Kingdom and the God-given Micah Mandate. May their lives and testimonies inspire us to also live faithfully and justly.

## B. The Early Church in the Patristic Period

We’ve seen in Chapter 4 how the early Church in the New Testament practised social justice. This practice persisted and took on different forms in the subsequent patristic period. That is during the time of the Church Fathers, from about 100 to 451 AD (the year in which the last ecumenical council, the Council of Chalcedon, was held).

Dionysius of Alexandria noted the distinctiveness of Christian response in contrast to that of the pagans during a plague in 262 AD:<sup>103</sup>

“The vast majority of our brethren were, in their very great love and brotherly affection, unsparing of themselves and supportive of one another. Visiting the sick without thought of the danger to themselves, resolutely caring for them, tending them in Christ, they readily left this life with them, after contracting the disease from others, drawing the sickness onto themselves from their neighbors, and willingly partaking in their sufferings. Many also, in nursing the sick and helping them to recover, themselves died, transferring to themselves the death coming to others and giving real meaning to the common saying that only ever

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<sup>102</sup> James M. Houston, ed., Blaise Pascal, *The Mind on Fire: Faith for the Skeptical and Indifferent* (David C Cook, 2006) at 210.

<sup>103</sup> Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967) at 56, cited in Michael Nai-Chiu Poon, “Christian Social Responsibilities in East Asia” in Michael Nai-Chiu Poon, ed., *Pilgrims and Citizens: Christian Social Engagement in East Asia Today* (ATF Press, 2006) at 96.

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seems to be a polite cliché, ‘Your humble servant bids you farewell’. The best of our brethren departed life in this way—some presbyters and deacons and some of the laity, greatly esteemed, so that, on account of the great devotion and strong faith it entails, this kind of death does not seem inferior to martyrdom. Gathering up the bodies of the saints with open hands into their laps, they closed their eyes and shut their mouths before carrying them on their shoulders and laying them out; they clasped and embraced them, washed and dressed them in grave clothes—then before long, the same would happen to them, since those left behind were continually following those who had preceded them. But the pagans behaved completely the opposite. They shunned those in the early stages of the illness, fled from their loved ones and abandoned them half-dead on the roads, and treated unburied corpses like garbage, in their efforts to avoid the spread and communication of the fatal disease—which was not easy to deflect whatever strategy they tried.”

Several Church Fathers preached heavily on justice and social ethics. John Chrysostom (349 to 407 AD), Archbishop of Constantinople between 349 and 407 AD, preached that because “all the wealth of the world belongs to you and to the others in common, as the sun, air, earth and all the rest”, Christians are to be generous always.<sup>104</sup> He also taught that Christians see Jesus in the poor. This perspective was subsequently followed by various influential Christian leaders, including Saint Vincent de Paul, a 17<sup>th</sup> century priest who founded an order to serve the poor of France. He said “[i]t is from your hands that Our Lord, in the person of the sick, seeks relief”.<sup>105</sup>

Basil (also known as Basil the Great) (329 to 379 AD), Bishop of Caesarea Mazaca in Asia Minor from about 370 to 379 AD, wrote about social justice. In particular, he wrote on wealth, poverty and usury.<sup>106</sup> He reminded Christians that calamities and disasters will equalise one and all, whether rich or poor. He taught that all of earth’s

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<sup>104</sup> Joel Cassady, “Saint John Chrysostom and Social Justice” (2009) *Obsculta* 2, (1): 5-12 at 7: <<http://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/obsculta/vol2/iss1/3>>.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>106</sup> Basil the Great, "On Social Justice" St Vladimirs Seminary Pr (November 1, 2009).

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resources belonged to a common property for all of humanity. Hence, justice requires that the rich share their resources with the poor. Basil wrote:<sup>107</sup>

“To whom am I doing an injustice’, he asks, ‘by keeping what is mine?’ Tell me, what kind of things belong to you? Where did you get them from, when you brought them into this life? ... That’s the rich for you. They get first hands on common property and make it theirs because they got it first...

If each person would only take for themselves what would meet their own needs and then relinquish what was left over to someone in need, no one would be rich, no one poor, no one in need. Were you not naked when you left the womb? Will you not be naked when the earth covers you again? Where do your present belongings come from? Say it is an accident of fate and you are an atheist, ignorant of the Creator, with no gratitude to show your benefactor. Admit, on the other hand, they come from God, tell us the reason why you got them. God is not unjust, is he, when he divides up unequally what keeps us alive? Why are you rich, but this man poor? Surely, above all, so that you may receive the reward for your goodness and trustworthy provision, while he is honoured with great prizes for enduring in patience. But do you think you are wronging nobody in depriving them of everything you sweep up into the bottomless pockets of your avarice? Who is a greedy person? The one who does not settle for self-sufficiency. Who is a robber? The one who makes off with everyone else’s property. Aren’t you greedy? Aren’t you a robber? Making your own private property what you took to administer? Isn’t the man who strips someone bare called a thief? And does the man who refuses to clothe the naked, when he is capable of doing so, deserve any other name? The bread you hold onto belongs to the hungry person. The cloak you guard in the store-cupboard belongs to the person who goes naked. The shoes rotting in your house belong to the person who walks barefoot. The silver you dug up and hoard belongs to the needy person. So you wrong as many as you could provide for.”

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<sup>107</sup> Peter Garnsey, *Thinking about Property: From Antiquity to the Age of Revolution* (Cambridge University Press, 2007) at 216-217.

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Gregory (335 to 395 AD), Bishop of Nyssa from 372 to 376 AD and 378 to 395 AD, was probably the first in the ancient world to expressly condemn slavery as inherently sinful. In Homilies on Ecclesiastes, he wrote:<sup>108</sup>

“I got me slave-girls and slaves.’ For what price, tell me? What did you find in existence worth as much as this human nature? What price did you put on rationality? How many obols did you reckon the equivalent of the likeness of God? How many staters did you get for selling that being shaped by God? God said, Let us make man in our own image and likeness. If he is in the likeness of God, and rules the whole earth, and has been granted authority over everything on earth from God, who is his buyer, tell me? Who is his seller? To God alone belongs this power; or, rather, not even to God himself. For his gracious gifts, it says, are irrevocable. God would not therefore reduce the human race to slavery, since he himself, when we had been enslaved to sin, spontaneously recalled us to freedom. But if God does not enslave what is free, who is he that sets his own power above God's?

... Is there any difference in these things between the slave and his owner? Do they not draw in the same air as they breathe? Do they not see the sun in the same way? Do they not alike sustain their being by consuming food? Is not the arrangement of their guts the same? Are not the two one dust after death? Is there not one judgment for them?—a common Kingdom, and a common Gehenna? If you are equal in all these ways, therefore, in what respect have you something extra, tell me, that you who are human think yourself the master of a human being, and say, I got me slaves and slave-girls, like herds of goats and pigs. For when he said, I got me slaves and slave-girls, he added that abundance in flocks of sheep and cattle came to him. For he says, and much property in cattle and sheep became mine, as though both cattle and slaves were subject to his authority to an equal degree.”

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<sup>108</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, Homilies on Ecclesiastes, 336.6, 337.13-338.14.

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The church did not only preach but also served. The church's care for the poor, both members and non-members of the church, was so pervasive and evident it stoked the displeasure of Julian, the Roman pagan emperor who reigned from 361 to 363 AD. He complained in a letter to his pagan high priest: "It is disgraceful that, when no Jew ever has to beg, and the impious Galileans [the Christians] support not only their own poor but ours as well, all men see that our people lack aid from us [that is, from the pagan priesthood]".<sup>109</sup>

Basil of Caesarea (329 to 379 AD) demonstrated a life of generous outpouring to the poor.<sup>110</sup> Originally a wealthy landowner, he sold his property and gave the proceeds to the poor. He set up a compound (known as the Basilias or Basil's place) which had a church, hospital and poorhouse to care for the sick and house the poor.

Marcella of Rome (325 to 410 AD), who came from a rich family, chose to use her wealth to help the poor along with other noblewomen.<sup>111</sup> She converted her mansion into a shelter for pilgrims and the poor. With her society of pious women, she was devoted to studying the scriptures, prayer and psalmody. Jerome wrote of her as one who would "[chose] to store her money in the stomachs of the poor rather than to keep it at her own disposal".<sup>112</sup>

Martin of Tours (316 to 397 AD) was born to a father who was a military tribune in the Roman army.<sup>113</sup> He later followed suit and enrolled into the army. One cold day at Gaul, he met a shivering half-naked beggar. Moved by compassion, he divided his coat into two parts and gave one of them to the beggar. The next day, he dreamt of Jesus

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<sup>109</sup> Peter Brown, *Poverty and Leadership in the Later Roman Empire* (University Press of New England, 2002) at 2.

<sup>110</sup> Rodger Charles, *Christian Social Witness and Teaching: Catholic Tradition from Genesis to Centesimus Annus: Volume 1: From Biblical Times to the Late Nineteenth Century* (Gracewing Publishing, 1998), at 87-88.

<sup>111</sup> Shane Claiborne, Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, Enuma Okoro, *Common Prayer: A Liturgy for Ordinary Radicals* (Zondervan, 2010) at 113.

<sup>112</sup> Jerome's Letter 127; Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series, Vol. 6. Edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace. (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1893.) Revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight: <<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3001127.htm>>.

<sup>113</sup> Shane Claiborne, Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, Enuma Okoro, *Common Prayer: A Liturgy for Ordinary Radicals* (Zondervan, 2010) at 134; Clugnet, Léon. "St. Martin of Tours." *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. Vol. 9. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1910. 30 Sept. 2015 <<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/09732b.htm>>.



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wearing that half of his coat. After his conversion and baptism, and convicted of nonviolence, he was imprisoned for his pacifist convictions. He later served as bishop of Tours.

Gregory the Great (540 to 604 AD), who was the Pope from 590 to 604 AD, also used his wealth to relief the poor, destitute and displaced persons, and to ransom captives. As Pope, he instituted a rigorous programme in Rome to provide for the poor. This included distributing food and other necessities through an army of monks, placing displaced families on church land and during the famine, directed the increase in production of farms owned by the church.<sup>114</sup>

Richer members of the early church generously gave of their assets to the church and to the poor. They would support and provide hospitality to the bishops and visiting priests and ascetics. They even used their wealth to pay the ransom of captives from exile and refugees. Flavian, a bishop of Antioch who came from a wealthy aristocratic background used a property he inherited to house the poor, particularly those persecuted and evicted from their homes for holding the true faith.<sup>115</sup>

Writing on the church in the antique period from about 300 to 600 AD, Peter Brown noted how the church, especially the bishops, performed her role as "lover of the poor".<sup>116</sup> This included the poor in fact and those who lived under the constant threat of poverty. The main body of the church was made up of "middling persons" who were not wealthy but who made modest but steady contributions to the church's support of the poor. For this class of persons, the church had to provide for them to protect them from falling into poverty. Significantly, Peter Brown notes that the church's provisions for the poor contrasted against a classical Roman "civic" model of society. Under the latter, the rich thought of themselves as fellow citizens of their city, as lovers of their city. Their generosity was applied to the city as a whole. The poor were invisible, non-citizens, living

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<sup>114</sup> Sr. Catherine Goddard Clark, M.I.C.M., "The Life of Saint Gregory the Great", Catholicism.org (11 July 2005).

<sup>115</sup> Wendy Mayer, "Poverty and generosity toward the poor in the time of John Chrysostom" in Susan R. Holman, *Wealth and Poverty in Early Church and Society* (BakerAcademic, 2008), Ch 10.

<sup>116</sup> *Poverty and Leadership in the Later Roman Empire* (University Press of New England, 2002); see Walter Brueggemann, "How the Early Church Practiced Charity", *The Christian Century*, June 14, 2003, pp. 30-31.

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at the margins of the city. Under the church's social ethics, the poor were made visible. The poor were the focus of the church's provision and care. The church reached out to the margins of the city. This new model of society became dominant in the Christian Middle Ages up to (and beyond) the age of Reformation.

### C. The Church in the Post-Patristic Period

Francis of Assisi (1181 to 1226) was born to a wealthy merchant family in Assisi, Italy.<sup>117</sup> Pursuing romantic aspirations of knighthood, he became a knight and fought in a war between Assisi and Perugia. There he was captured, imprisoned for a year but later released upon payment of ransom. After his release, while riding through the countryside, he encountered a leper and, moved by a holy impulse, embraced and kissed him. After the experience, he dedicated his life to Christ, to a life of poverty and to the edification of the Church. His preaching led many wealthy people in the Church to live in Christ-likeness, including turning away from wealth and materialism.

Clare of Assisi (1194 to 1255) was born into a wealthy, noble Italian family but ran away from home after hearing Francis of Assisi preach on the streets.<sup>118</sup> She founded the Franciscan monastic community of the Order of Poor ladies (The Poor Clares) at San Damiano and became abbess of the order in 1216, leading the sisters in commitment to poverty and manual labour.

Osanna of Mantua, Italy (1449 to 1505) was a Tertiary of the Third Order of Dominicans.<sup>119</sup> Born to wealthy parents, she devoted her life to Christ when she experienced divine visions. Throughout her life, she frequently experienced mystical visions and stigmata. Her life was dedicated to helping the poor and sick, expending her

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<sup>117</sup> Shane Claiborne, Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, Enuma Okoro, *Common Prayer: A Liturgy for Ordinary Radicals* (Zondervan, 2010) at 145; Biography.com Editors, "St. Francis of Assisi Biography", A&E Television Networks: <<http://www.biography.com/people/st-francis-of-assisi-21152679>>; John Stott, *The Incomparable Christ* (OM Books, 2005) at 126-128.

<sup>118</sup> Shane Claiborne, Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, Enuma Okoro, *Common Prayer: A Liturgy for Ordinary Radicals* (Zondervan, 2010) at 138.

<sup>119</sup> Shane Claiborne, Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, Enuma Okoro, *Common Prayer: A Liturgy for Ordinary Radicals* (Zondervan, 2010) at 132; "Blessed Osanna Andreasi". CatholicSaints.Info. 14 June 2015. Web. 30 September 2015. <<http://catholicsaints.info/blessed-osanna-andreasi/>>.

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family fortunes to providing for the needy. She would speak up against the aristocrats who lived in luxury while many others suffered.

Basil the Blessed, also known as Basil the Fool for Christ and Wonderworker of Moscow (1468 to 1552), was born into a peasant family near Moscow.<sup>120</sup> He would go about the city doing seemingly strange things but which were meant to call out on wrongs (like walking through Moscow naked, throwing stones at the homes of the rich).<sup>121</sup> He spoke up against people in power, chastising them to show compassion for the poor and destitute. He even directly rebuked Ivan IV Vasilyevich also known as the Terrible, the Russian Tsar of that time, for his vicious treatment of the innocent. In one incident during the Lenten fasting season when Ivan the Terrible was destroying the city of Novgorod, Basil offered the Tsar raw meat, which he declined. Basil then rebuked the Tsar's destruction of innocent lives, equating it as akin to eating raw meat.<sup>122</sup> Yet, Ivan the Terrible respected and sought blessings from Basil. He even attended Basil's funeral. Today, Basil is venerated as a Russian Orthodox Saint.

The Protestant Reformers emphasised care for the poor as a form of "good works" being an expression of faith and love.<sup>123</sup> Huldrych Zwingli (1484 to 1531), leader of the Swiss Reformation, preached that brotherly love for the Christian poor was an expression of loving God in the individual believer's daily life.

Martin Luther (1483 to 1546), a German pioneer of the Reformation, preached caring for the poor as a consequence and expression of faith. Luther believed that fighting poverty was a Christian social responsibility (at the time, the Roman Catholic Church unfortunately neglected the poor in practice).<sup>124</sup> Together with other like-minded

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<sup>120</sup> Shane Claiborne, Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, Enuma Okoro, *Common Prayer: A Liturgy for Ordinary Radicals* (Zondervan, 2010) at 137.

<sup>121</sup> John Binns, *An Introduction to the Christian Orthodox Churches* (Cambridge University Press, 2002) at 121.

<sup>122</sup> John Binns, *An Introduction to the Christian Orthodox Churches* (Cambridge University Press, 2002) at 121.

<sup>123</sup> Lee Palmer Wandel, *The Reformation: Towards a New History* (Cambridge University Press, 2011) at 189-191.

<sup>124</sup> Carter Lindberg, "Luther on Poverty" in Timothy J. Wengert, *Harvesting Martin Luther's Reflections on Theology, Ethics, and the Church* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2004) at 141-151; Paul S. Chung, *Church and Ethical Responsibility in the Midst of World Economy: Greed, Dominion, and Justice* (James Clarke & Co, 2014) at 40-42.

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believers, he worked with local governments in Germany to implement social welfare policies. Under the Wittenberg Church Order 1522, 'common chests' were set up to provide for orphans, children of poor families, interest-free loans to needy groups of people, poor maidens who needed money for dowry, and education and vocational training for poor children. The Leisnig Order also provided for maintenance and support for those unable to work because of illness, old age or extreme poverty. Other church orders provided for health care, including midwifery, nursing and hospitals. Luther argued against capitalism, particularly usury, exploitative and greedy capitalists, the credit economy, the "impersonal market" and the "autonomous laws of economics".<sup>125</sup> Usury, he declared, "lives off the bodies of the poor". He argued for the limitation of capitalism, e.g. the cancellation of debts of the needy poor. He criticized the effects of capitalism in Wittenberg in 1520-1538 when cost of living doubled whereas wages stagnated. In his advice to the Town Council of Danzig in 1525, he posited that government regulation of interest on loans should be regulated by equity. He recommended a limit of 5% (when the norm then was 40-50%) subject to the lender's economic situation. For instance, a wealthy lender should waive interest whereas a lender who needs the income should be allowed to charge interest. Luther was convinced that the aforesaid greedy behaviour and economic structures were idolatry of Mammon.<sup>126</sup> However, he was also opposed to asceticism towards money. Money was in his view a gift from God for Christians to bless others with, serving neighbours and building the community.<sup>127</sup>

John Calvin, also known as Jean Calvin or Jehan Cauvin (1509 to 1564), a French pioneer of the Reformation, established the office of the deacon as having responsibility for caring for the poor. He too preached against usury, arguing that interest rates have to be set at an equitable rate on a case-by-case basis, and criticized the exploitation of the poor.<sup>128</sup> Christians are to contribute to provisions for the needy

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<sup>125</sup> See Martin Luther's "Sermon on Usury" (1519), "Lectures on Deuteronomy" (1523), "Admonition to the Clergy that they Preach against Usury" (1540). Carter Lindberg, "Luther on Poverty" in Timothy J. Wengert, *Harvesting Martin Luther's Reflections on Theology, Ethics, and the Church* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2004) at 147-148; Carter Lindberg, "Luther on Government Responsibility for the Poor".

<sup>126</sup> Carter Lindberg, "Luther on the Use of Money", *Christian History* (1987): <<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ch/1987/issue14/1417.html>>.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>128</sup> Paul S. Chung, *Church and Ethical Responsibility in the Midst of World Economy: Greed, Dominion, and Justice* (James Clarke & Co, 2014) at 42-45.

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according to their means, resulting in proportional equality.<sup>129</sup> While private property is indeed private, it should be used for the common good of the community. Based on his reading of the biblical account of God's distribution of manna, Calvin saw the rich as "ministers of the poor", and the poor as "receivers of God, the vicars of Christ, or the proxies or solicitors of God".<sup>130</sup>

Martin de Porres (1579 to 1639) was a Dominican clergy of mixed race born in Lima, Peru to a Spanish nobleman and a black mother who was formerly a slave.<sup>131</sup> He had a special gift of healing and extended his service to everyone, rich and poor. In one incident, he invited an aged beggar whose body was covered with ulcers to rest on his bed and was reprimanded for it. In another, the prior reprimanded Martin for disobeying him in taking a poor Indian who was bleeding profusely from a dagger wound into his own room until he could transport the man to his sister's house which she had converted into a hospice. He fed about 160 poor persons daily and also founded a residence for orphans and abandoned children.

Vincent de Paul (1581 to 1660) was a French priest who was kidnapped by African pirates, sold into slavery but escaped after converting his slave master.<sup>132</sup> He later organised wealthy women in his parish in France to raise funds for missions, founding hospitals, providing relief for victims of war and to ransom galley slaves from Africa. He became venerated as the patron saint of charity.

### D. The Church in the 19th to 21st centuries

William Wilberforce (1759 to 1833) was an English Member of Parliament from 1784 to 1825.<sup>133</sup> Famous for his championing the cause of the abolition of slavery and

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<sup>129</sup> See John Calvin's Commentary on 2 Corinthians 8:13-15.

<sup>130</sup> Paul S. Chung, *Church and Ethical Responsibility in the Midst of World Economy: Greed, Dominion, and Justice* (James Clarke & Co, 2014) at 45.

<sup>131</sup> Shane Claiborne, Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, Enuma Okoro, *Common Prayer: A Liturgy for Ordinary Radicals* (Zondervan, 2010) at 149; <[http://www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php?saint\\_id=306](http://www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php?saint_id=306)>.

<sup>132</sup> Shane Claiborne, Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, Enuma Okoro, *Common Prayer: A Liturgy for Ordinary Radicals* (Zondervan, 2010) at 144; <[http://www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php?saint\\_id=326](http://www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php?saint_id=326)>.

<sup>133</sup> See: <<https://www.gci.org/history/wilberforce/>>; <<https://www.christianhistoryinstitute.org/study/module/wilberforce/>>; John Piper, *Amazing Grace in the Life of William Wilberforce* (Crossway Books, 2006).

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the slave trade in England, he became an evangelical Christian in 1784. The former slave trader captain turned clergy and author of the hymn “Amazing Grace”, John Newton, encouraged him to stay in politics upon his conversion. He did so and was led to champion the abolitionist cause alongside people like Thomas Clarkson. Wilberforce was also dubbed “the prime minister of a cabinet of philanthropists”. He gave away a quarter of his income to the poor and championed many philanthropic causes and social reforms, advocating for the welfare of chimney sweeps, single mothers, Sunday schools, orphans, prisons, juvenile delinquents and animals. He also helped found parachurch groups like the Society for Bettering the Cause of the Poor, the Church Missionary Society, the British and Foreign Bible Society, and the Antislavery Society.<sup>134</sup> He persistently introduced bills to abolish the slave trade and slavery since the 1790s but these were all rejected. In 1807, Parliament voted in favour of abolishing the slave trade. And only in 1833, just three days before his death, the Slavery Abolition Bill was passed in the British House of Commons. Wilberforce’s evangelical faith motivated him in his lifelong work, the “peculiar doctrines” of “peculiar doctrines” in Christianity.<sup>135</sup> And his fellowship with the Clapham Sect, a group of influential Anglican believers who shared the same passion and burdens as Wilberforce, encouraged him to persevere four decades of advocacy for just causes despite repeated rejection. A point of interest about Wilberforce’s connection with Singapore is that his faith and social activism had a significant positive impact on Sir Stamford Raffles, the founder of British Colonial Singapore. This led to Raffles becoming more supportive of Christian missions in Singapore and Indonesia. Raffles had even nominated Wilberforce to be the patron of Raffles Institution.<sup>136</sup>

Anthony Ashley Cooper, the Seventh Earl of Shaftesbury (1801 to 1884), was a social reformer British Member of Parliament known as “the Poor Man’s Earl”.<sup>137</sup> Driven by his strong evangelical faith and the pre-millennialist conviction of Christ’s imminent return (he was a close friend of the famous preacher Charles Spurgeon), he was passionate in building the Church, furthering missions and reforming British society

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<sup>134</sup> See: <<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ch/131christians/activists/wilberforce.html?start=2>>.

<sup>135</sup> John Piper, *Amazing Grace in the Life of William Wilberforce* (Crossway Books, 2006) at 22-25.

<sup>136</sup> Bobby Sng, *In His Good Time: The Story of the Church in Singapore, 1819 - 2002*, 3rd edn. (Bible Society of Singapore/Graduates' Christian Fellowship, 2003) at 34-35.

<sup>137</sup> Richard Turnbull, *Shaftesbury: The Great Reformer* (Lion Hudson, 2010); see also <<http://on-christianity.blogspot.com/2008/06/work-and-thought-of-shaftesbury.html>>.

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during the grim Industrial Revolution. He founded or presided over many societies with causes from Christian missions to education for poor children, from the mentally ill to the disabled. He advocated for, and ensured the enforcement of, various legislation including the Factory Act, the Mines and Collieries Act, the Lunacy Act, the Chimney Sweeps Act. What were Shaftesbury's motivations? His strong belief in church unity and evangelical faith, lay agency being absolutely necessary in mission work, the unity of body and soul and the need to care for both and not only one over the other, proper stewardship of God-given resources and talents, and the imminent return of Christ.<sup>138</sup> As a matter of social concern and justice, his beliefs in God's desire for human happiness and flourishing, the equal dignity of every human person and the need for imitation of God's character of justice and mercy towards the needy motivated him to take up various causes of social justice. On the proper stewardship of the resources he has been given by God, he wrote:<sup>139</sup>

“Every one chooses a career, and it is well if he chooses that which is best suited to his talents. I have taken political life because I have, by God's blessing, many advantages of birth and situation which, although of trifling value if unsupported, are yet very powerful aids if joined to zeal and honesty. It is here, therefore, that I have the chief way of being useful to my generation.”

Shaftesbury was convicted that Christians are duty-bound to use what God has given to them to serve others and that the failure to do so was the sin of omission. This is especially urgent given the imminent return of Christ. For him, the time was coming when “matters will be measured by those who have the truest faith, the deepest love, and the most sincere acts of obedience to their Lord and Saviour, and most devoted and strong imitation of his blessed example”.<sup>140</sup>

George Müller a.k.a. George Mueller (1805 to 1898) was a German Plymouth Brethren who lived most of his life in Bristol, England.<sup>141</sup> In his university days, he was a

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<sup>138</sup> Richard Turnbull, *Shaftesbury: The Great Reformer* (Lion Hudson, 2010) at 206-223.

<sup>139</sup> Richard Turnbull, *Shaftesbury: The Great Reformer* (Lion Hudson, 2010) at 28.

<sup>140</sup> Richard Turnbull, *Shaftesbury: The Great Reformer* (Lion Hudson, 2010) at 222.

<sup>141</sup> George Muller, *The Autobiography Of George Muller* (Whitaker House; Rev Upd edition: 1996); A. T. Pierson's *George Mueller of Bristol: His Life of Prayer and Faith* (1889; reprint, Grand Rapids, Mich.:

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wild partygoer who loved to drink and gamble. He would also steal money from his father. Although he was studying theology in university, this was a practical career choice. His life changed when he was invited to a private Bible study where for the first time in his life, he was convicted by God's word. He decided to become a missionary in England. However, he fell seriously ill and was thus prevented from doing so. But it also resulted in his conscription to the German army being averted.

He subsequently did go to England to pastor a small church, which wanted to pay him a handsome salary. He refused. For one, the church had a practice of charging rental to the rich members for sitting at the front row pews, leaving the poor at the back. (What a contrast! In my church, nobody wants to sit at the front row pews!) More importantly, he refused to accept a salary because he believed that God would provide for his and his family's needs. This would characterise his entire life. He trusted in God to provide everything. Even when he was led to start an Institute for biblical education, Bible distribution, missionary support, and care & education for orphan children. Throughout his life, he started several orphanages (the first being his own home) which cared for about 10,000 children and more than 100 schools which provided Christian education to more than 120,000 children, all on faith and prayer alone. By this, it is meant that he never asked anyone for money.

I remember especially one amazing anecdote of his faith. One day, the orphanage had run out of food to feed the 300 children lodging there. Mueller sat them down at the dining room and thanked God for the food and waited. Shortly after, a baker knocked on the door and delivered bread, explaining that he couldn't sleep the night before and somehow knew that Mueller would need the bread that morning! Yet another anecdote is about Mueller taking a boat to cross the Atlantic to attend to some engagement in Quebec. The captain of the boat told him it was impossible because of the dense fog. Mueller replied that his God would surely provide for him a way to fulfil his engagement. He prayed and the very next moment, the fog was gone!

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Kregel, 1999); Basil Miller, *George Mueller* (Men of Faith series, Bethany House); <<http://www.desiringgod.org/messages/george-muellers-strategy-for-showing-god>>. N.B. I had the privilege of co-writing the script for, and co-directing, a musical on the life of George Mueller staged by my local church, Yio Chu Kang Chapel, in February 2010.



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He did all of the above while pastoring a church, preaching 3 times a week. At 70 years of age, Mueller began travelling around the world to 42 countries to preach until he was 87 years old. When Mueller passed away, "Tens of thousands of people reverently stood along the route of the simple procession; men left their workshops and offices, women left their elegant homes or humble kitchens, all seeking to pay a last token of respect".<sup>142</sup> His faith inspired many, including Hudson Taylor. As a note of interest, Mueller is in fact connected to the Singapore Church, particularly the local Brethren churches. One of the members of Mueller's church (or at least, it is speculated to be so<sup>143</sup>) was Philip Robinson, an English businessman who came to Singapore and started Spicer and Robinson at Commercial Square, what became the departmental store, Robinson and Company.<sup>144</sup> Robinson would establish a Brethren fellowship called Bethesda Chapel at Bras Basah Road. It was from this fellowship which many of the Brethren churches trace their genesis. I quote his exhortation to challenge Christians to live a life of faith here:-

"My dear Christian reader, will you not try this way? Will you not know for yourself ... the preciousness and the happiness of this way of casting all your cares and burdens and necessities upon God? This way is as open to you as to me. ... Every one is invited and commanded to trust in the Lord, to trust in Him with all his heart, and to cast his burden upon Him, and to call upon Him in the day of trouble. Will you not do this, my dear brethren in Christ? I long that you may do so. I desire that you may taste the sweetness of that state of heart, in which, while surrounded by difficulties and necessities, you can yet be at peace, because you know that the living God, your Father in heaven, cares for you."

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<sup>142</sup> A. T. Pierson's *George Mueller of Bristol: His Life of Prayer and Faith* (1889; reprint, Grand Rapids, Mich.: Kregel, 1999) at 286.

<sup>143</sup> Jason Lim, "Assumptions and Evidence: The Case of Philip Robinson", Brethren Historians and Archivists Network Review, Vol. 3, No. 1, 2004, pp. 18-47; Tong Suit Chee, ed., *The Brethren Story* (Bethesda Frankel Estate Church, 2014) at 16.

<sup>144</sup> Bobby Sng, *In His Good Time: The Story of the Church in Singapore, 1819 - 2002*, 3rd edn. (Bible Society of Singapore/Graduates' Christian Fellowship, 2003) at 76.

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John Wesley (1703 to 1791) and Charles Wesley (1707 to 1788) were the pioneers of the Methodist Church.<sup>145</sup> As students in Oxford University, they spurred one another to live in personal and social holiness. They would visit prisoners and serve the poor. John Wesley's compassion for the poor can be traced to a significant event which occurred when he was in Oxford University. It was a cold winter's day and a young chambermaid who did not have enough clothes to protect her from the weather called on Wesley. Moved by compassion, he wanted to give her some money to get food and clothes for herself. But he realised that he had just spent all his money purchasing some pictures for his room. Struck with regret, he thought to himself, "Will thy Master say, 'Well done, good and faithful steward! Thou hast adorned thy walls with the money which might have screened this poor creature from the cold!' O justice! O mercy! Are not these pictures the blood of this poor maid! ... Everything about thee, which cost more than Christian duty required thee to lay out, is the blood of the poor! O be wise for the time to come! Be more merciful! More faithful to God and man! More abundantly adorned (like men and women professing godliness) with good works!".<sup>146</sup> Since that event, Wesley lived frugally, living only on £28 a year when he earned more than £30,000 over his lifetime, giving away the rest to the needy. Wesley was convicted that social holiness and concern for the poor and marginalised was essential to Christian discipleship and growing into holiness unto Christ. Indeed, a Christian's ministry to the poor becomes a means of grace by which God does His work of holiness in us.<sup>147</sup> Wesley exhorted people to "Earn all you can. Save all you can. Give all you can".<sup>148</sup> He was active in championing social reform, advocating for affordable education of children in a time when children were being made to work long hours doing hard labour in factories and mines, advocating against alcoholism, prostitution, pornography and gambling for the severe ill effect that these had on society, and advocated against slavery. He believed social holiness means not merely providing charitable care but also confront systemic issues as a "Christian duty to eliminate their wretchedness".<sup>149</sup> He started a loan fund for needy

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<sup>145</sup> Robert M. Solomon, *Jesus Our Jubilee* (Discovery House, 2015) at 88-95; Manfred Marquardt, *John Wesley's Social Ethics* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2000).

<sup>146</sup> John Wesley, "On Dress" in Albert Outler, *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 3 (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1986) at 255.

<sup>147</sup> Robert M. Solomon, *Jesus Our Jubilee* (Discovery House, 2015) at 92.

<sup>148</sup> Robert M. Solomon, *Jesus Our Jubilee* (Discovery House, 2015) at 92.

<sup>149</sup> Manfred Marquardt, *John Wesley's Social Ethics* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2000) at 27.

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persons, a system for finding jobs, and when he couldn't place people in jobs, he started economic enterprises to create work. His ministry in this regard sowed the seed in William Wilberforce who would later take up a life long cause to fight against slavery. Wesley's convictions were shared and manifested by the early Methodists, who would raise funds, food, clothes and medicine for the poor, starting schools for poor children, orphanages and clinics.

William Booth (1829 to 1912) was an English man who founded the Salvation Army.<sup>150</sup> In his early life he evangelised at open-air public areas, travelling around poor districts of London to preach the Gospel. He started educational and training schemes and provide meals, clothing and other assistance to prostitutes, migrants, the destitute, etc. believing that this would sow the seeds for evangelism. The Salvation Army has grown over the years to become one of the largest international humanitarian charities today.

Father Joseph Damien (1840 to 1889) was a Belgium Roman Catholic priest who went to Hawaii as a missionary and was moved by compassion for the leprosy victims banished on the island of Molokai that he decided to live with them. He buried their dead, built churches and chapels, cleaned their water supply, improved their homes and hospital, constructed an orphanage, trained a choir, served as their teacher, carpenter, mason, priest and friend. In 1889, he died on the island having contracted leprosy himself.<sup>151</sup>

Wellesley Bailey (1846 to 1937) was an Irish Protestant who taught at a mission school in North West India near a 'leper asylum'.<sup>152</sup> There he was convicted of the image of Christ being among the leper victims, and was moved with compassion to bring the gospel to the patients and improve their physical condition. In 1872, he founded 'The Mission to Lepers in India' at a time when few cared about leprosy. The Mission continues to serve lepers till today.

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See

<<http://www.salvationarmy.org.uk/history-william-booth>>;

<<http://www.biographyonline.net/spiritual/william-booth.html>>; Kate Pickert, "A brief history of the Salvation Army", Time (2 December 2008).

<sup>151</sup> John Stott, *The Incomparable Christ* (OM Books, 2005) at 135.

<sup>152</sup> John Stott, *The Incomparable Christ* (OM Books, 2005) at 136.

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Mother Teresa of Calcutta (1910 to 1997) is well known to many.<sup>153</sup> Born Agnes Gonxha Bojaxhiu in Skopje, Macedonia, she heard a call to minister to Christ among the poorest in Calcutta, India. She took in many people who were dying on the streets, the sick, the orphaned and the destitute, providing them with basic food and necessities when she herself had no resources, depending wholly on God's provision. She later founded her own order, The Missionaries of Charity. Over the course of her career, she established a school for slum children, a leper colony, an orphanage, a nursing home and several medical clinics.

Sojourner Truth (1797 to 1883) was born into slavery in New York<sup>154</sup>. After she was liberated from slavery and became a Christian, she took on the name Sojourner Truth: "Sojourner because I was to travel up and down the land showing people their sins and being a sign to them, and Truth because I was to declare the truth unto the people". She travelled across the country advocating for abolition of slavery and women's suffrage, also ministered to and cared for former slaves in a refugee camp in Washington D.C. She petitioned the U.S. government to provide transportation and land for former slaves to relocate to western states.

Dorothy Day (1897 to 1980) was born in Brooklyn, New York, and later worked as a journalist for radical newspapers.<sup>155</sup> She was a political activist, advocating for pacifism and women's suffrage. Later, with a former Catholic clergy, she started the Catholic Worker Movement, which sought to think through and advocate for Catholic principles applied to social justice issues. She also established hospitality houses to help needy persons.

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<sup>153</sup> "Mother Teresa - Biographical". Nobelprize.org. Nobel Media AB 2014. Web. 2 Oct 2015. <[http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/peace/laureates/1979/teresa-bio.html](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1979/teresa-bio.html)>; Shane Claiborne, Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, Enuma Okoro, *Common Prayer: A Liturgy for Ordinary Radicals* (Zondervan, 2010) at 141; Biography.com Editors, "Mother Teresa Biography", A&E Television Networks: <<http://www.biography.com/people/mother-teresa-9504160#the-missionaries-of-charity>>.

<sup>154</sup> Shane Claiborne, Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, Enuma Okoro, *Common Prayer: A Liturgy for Ordinary Radicals* (Zondervan, 2010) at 150; <<http://www.sojournertruth.org/Library/Archive/LegacyOfFaith.htm>>; <<http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/odyssey/educate/truth.html>>; Biography.com Editors, "Sojourner Truth Biography", A&E Television Networks: <<http://www.biography.com/people/sojourner-truth-9511284>>.

<sup>155</sup> Shane Claiborne, Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, Enuma Okoro, *Common Prayer: A Liturgy for Ordinary Radicals* (Zondervan, 2010) at 151; Biography.com Editors, "Dorothy Day Biography", A&E Television Networks: <<http://www.biography.com/people/dorothy-day-9268575#journalist-and-activist>>.

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## E. Singapore Church<sup>156</sup>

### *Pre-Independence*

In British Colonial Singapore since 1819, the first providers of social services were (among others) the Christian missionaries. One of the contributors to the establishment of Raffles Institution (RI) in 1823 was Robert Morrison (one of the houses in RI is named after him). He was a zealous missionary with the London Missionary Society (LMS) who was involved in the setting up of the Anglo-Chinese College in Malacca.<sup>157</sup> In fact, after RI (originally named Singapore Institution) was launched by Raffles and a group of trustees in 1823, the project did not actually take off. Raffles merely laid the foundation stone. A decade later, there was still no school. It was the Anglican Chaplain Rev. Fred Darrah who, burdened by the need for public education, took action to appeal for funds to start the school. The Singapore Free School then commenced on 1 August 1834. Various missionaries assisted in the school. Rev. Dickenson of the ABCFM was the Chinese master and Rev. Keasberry the Malay master.<sup>158</sup>

Another example is Bishop William Fitzjames Oldham of the Methodist Church who founded the Anglo-Chinese School.<sup>159</sup> He had originally joined a local “Celestial Reasoning Society” comprising of many leaders in the Chinese business community. His intention was to use the platform to share the gospel. There, Tan Keong Saik, a member of the Legislative Council was impressed by Oldham and requested him to improve his English. After such tutoring, other Chinese merchants also approached Oldham to be their tutor. He declined, but offered to teach their sons instead. The Anglo-Chinese School was thus started on 1 March 1886 in a rented shophouse in Amoy Street. The school expanded to a boarding school and more missionaries came to help him. His wife

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<sup>156</sup> See generally *Many Faces, One Faith* (National Council of Churches Singapore, 2004).

<sup>157</sup> Bobby Sng, *In His Good Time: The Story of the Church in Singapore, 1819 - 2002*, 3rd edn. (Bible Society of Singapore/Graduates' Christian Fellowship, 2003) at 27-28.

<sup>158</sup> Bobby Sng, *In His Good Time: The Story of the Church in Singapore, 1819 - 2002*, 3rd edn. (Bible Society of Singapore/Graduates' Christian Fellowship, 2003) at 110.

<sup>159</sup> See Earnest Lau, *From Mission to Church: the Evolution of the Methodist Church in Singapore and Malaysia, 1885-1976* (Singapore: Armour Publishing Pte Ltd, 2008).

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Marie tended to the welfare of the boarders.<sup>160</sup> Later, Sophia Blackmore came to Singapore and saw the needs of the women. At that time, Chinese cultural norms were prejudiced against women. Girls were not allowed to go to school or leave the house without a chaperon. Prospects for women were bleak. Blackmore believed that the solution was to provide education for girls. She began by starting the Tamil Girls' School, with the help of local Indians and missionaries and local Christian leaders. Blackmore faced many struggles in her work. Parents were unwilling to let their daughters go to school. Some were suspicious of the missionaries. Nevertheless, Blackmore persevered. The school eventually grew and was renamed the Methodist Girls' School, which survives today.<sup>161</sup>

The LMS' Maria Dyer also established the Chinese Girls' School (CGS) in 1842, which became present-day St. Margaret's Primary School.<sup>162</sup> She was later succeeded by a Ms. Grant who ran CGS as a boarding school, which would take in unwanted girls (in those days, the Chinese had negative cultural attitudes towards daughters). Sophia Cooke would later take over Ms. Grant. Cooke continued the good work done by CGS. She would take in abandoned girls or girls sold into servitude but rescued by the police, and there CGS taught the girls to read and write, do domestic work and to study the Bible. Cooke later founded the Singapore branch of the Young Women's Christian Association in 1875, which was largely comprised of former CGS students. They met regularly for Bible study and fellowship and making visits to the sick in the hospitals, cleaning lepers and attending to the poor and needy in slum areas. In 1882, Cooke set up a Sailor's' Rest in South Bridge Road to care for sailors who came to Singapore who had been exploited by the locals. Some would be drugged, robbed, beaten up and left destitute.<sup>163</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> Bobby Sng, *In His Good Time: The Story of the Church in Singapore, 1819 - 2002*, 3rd edn. (Bible Society of Singapore/Graduates' Christian Fellowship, 2003) at 111-112.

<sup>161</sup> Bobby Sng, *In His Good Time: The Story of the Church in Singapore, 1819 - 2002*, 3rd edn. (Bible Society of Singapore/Graduates' Christian Fellowship, 2003) at 112-115.

<sup>162</sup> Bobby Sng, *In His Good Time: The Story of the Church in Singapore, 1819 - 2002*, 3rd edn. (Bible Society of Singapore/Graduates' Christian Fellowship, 2003) at 62.

<sup>163</sup> Bobby Sng, *In His Good Time: The Story of the Church in Singapore, 1819 - 2002*, 3rd edn. (Bible Society of Singapore/Graduates' Christian Fellowship, 2003) at 62-66. Gracie Lee, "Sophie Cooke", National Library Board, Singapore Infopedia (2009): <[http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP\\_1347\\_2009-02-13.html](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_1347_2009-02-13.html)>.

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As the Chinese immigrants came to Singapore in large waves, many were deceived by 'coolie brokers' and syndicates as to their work and work conditions. Such 19th century labour trafficking led to many Chinese labourers being sold to, and entrapped in debt bondage to, plantation owners. (It is unfortunate that this phenomenon still continues today in modern day Singapore. It is ironic that as descendants of these immigrants, many Singaporean Chinese today are oblivious to the plight of such migrant workers.) Churches like St. Andrew's Cathedral, Chinese Gospel Hall and later the Presbyterian Church attended to the needs of these Chinese immigrants.<sup>164</sup> Bobby Sng notes that the Presbyterian Church had 500 new converts baptised from among these immigrants. He attributed this to the compassion and practical help shown by the Presbyterian Church to the needy in the context of rampant poverty and fear of secret societies.<sup>165</sup> Rev. Tay Sek Tin of Paya Lebar Presbyterian Church raised money to provide medication for opium addicts and set up a Chinese Reading Room in Cross Street to provide reading material for the moral and general uplift of the Chinese community.<sup>166</sup>

The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) also made an impact in Colonial Singapore. Their Rev. J.T. Dickenson started a school in Telok Ayer, while Dr. Peter Parker opened a clinic which treated over 13,000 patients in its first year of operation.<sup>167</sup> A missionary Dr. B. F. West and his wife started a medical dispensary in the Telok Ayer district, preached to the patients and ran a Sunday school for the children.<sup>168</sup> The Anglican Church set up a medical clinic in 1913 at a shophouse in Bencoolen Street. The clinic grew in its work, treating 12,136 patients in 1917. In 1923, the ministry grew into a 60-bed mission hospital at Erskine Road in Chinatown.<sup>169</sup> The Anglican Church also founded St. Andrew's School and a home for the blind in

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<sup>164</sup> Bobby Sng, *In His Good Time: The Story of the Church in Singapore, 1819 - 2002*, 3rd edn. (Bible Society of Singapore/Graduates' Christian Fellowship, 2003) at 99.

<sup>165</sup> Bobby Sng, *In His Good Time: The Story of the Church in Singapore, 1819 - 2002*, 3rd edn. (Bible Society of Singapore/Graduates' Christian Fellowship, 2003) at 102.

<sup>166</sup> Bobby Sng, *In His Good Time: The Story of the Church in Singapore, 1819 - 2002*, 3rd edn. (Bible Society of Singapore/Graduates' Christian Fellowship, 2003) at 104.

<sup>167</sup> Bobby Sng, *In His Good Time: The Story of the Church in Singapore, 1819 - 2002*, 3rd edn. (Bible Society of Singapore/Graduates' Christian Fellowship, 2003) at 37.

<sup>168</sup> Bobby Sng, *In His Good Time: The Story of the Church in Singapore, 1819 - 2002*, 3rd edn. (Bible Society of Singapore/Graduates' Christian Fellowship, 2003) at 116.

<sup>169</sup> Bobby Sng, *In His Good Time: The Story of the Church in Singapore, 1819 - 2002*, 3rd edn. (Bible Society of Singapore/Graduates' Christian Fellowship, 2003) at 144-145.

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Penang.<sup>170</sup> The Salvation Army set up a Boy's Industrial Home in 1936 to provide destitute boys with shelter, food, elementary education and skills training for potential employment.<sup>171</sup> The Salvation Army also started ministries in rehabilitation of ex-prisoners (Discharged Prisoners Aid Society, later known as the After-Care of Prisoners Association), a Girls' Home, and other social welfare work.<sup>172</sup>

During the war, bold individuals from the Anglican Church and The Salvation Army refused to evacuate from the Straits Settlement and worked in temporary shelters to provide food and shelter for the many made homeless from the Japanese attack.<sup>173</sup> In the immediate aftermath of World War II and the Japanese Occupation in Singapore, the British Military Administration convened an Emergency Relief Committee on 17 September 1945. This Committee delegated the execution of relief aid to various charitable organisations, many of which were Christian organisations.<sup>174</sup>

In the aftermath of WWII, Malaya (including Singapore) faced threats from communist insurgents, namely the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) who deployed jungle guerrilla tactics. The MCP would harass villagers for supplies. In 1950, the Director of Operations in Malaya, Lt-Gen. Sir Harold Briggs launched a plan (known as Briggs' Plan) to resettle about 500,000 Chinese farmers into about 600 New Villages, which were protected, fenced villages.<sup>175</sup> This was to prevent the MCP's access to these villages and their supplies. However, there were much social and practical needs arising from this resettlement. The Malayan Christian Council through its New Villages Coordinating Committee coordinated churches and missionary bodies to provide basic social needs like medical care, education, youth work, social rehabilitation, etc. By 1953, there were

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<sup>170</sup> John Hayter and Jack Bennitt, Priests of the Diocese, "The War and After: Singapore" (London: Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, c. 1947): < [http://anglicanhistory.org/asia/sg/hayter\\_bennitt/](http://anglicanhistory.org/asia/sg/hayter_bennitt/)>.

<sup>171</sup> "Rescuing Boys From The Streets Of Singapore", The Straits Times (29 November 1936).

<sup>172</sup> Bobby Sng, In His Good Time: The Story of the Church in Singapore, 1819 - 2002, 3rd edn. (Bible Society of Singapore/Graduates' Christian Fellowship, 2003) at 147.

<sup>173</sup> John Hayter and Jack Bennitt, Priests of the Diocese, "The War and After: Singapore" (London: Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, c. 1947): < [http://anglicanhistory.org/asia/sg/hayter\\_bennitt/](http://anglicanhistory.org/asia/sg/hayter_bennitt/)>.

<sup>174</sup> "Emergency relief for Singapore's poor", The Straits Times (3 October 1945); "Singapore Relief Policy", The Straits Times (20 September 1945).

<sup>175</sup> Bobby Sng, In His Good Time: The Story of the Church in Singapore, 1819 - 2002, 3rd edn. (Bible Society of Singapore/Graduates' Christian Fellowship, 2003) at 207. Ooi Keat Gin, Historical Dictionary of Malaysia (Scarecrow Press, 2009) at 39.



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120 Christian workers staying in these villages and another 150 voluntary workers living nearby who visited the villages to serve in this ministry.<sup>176</sup>

### *Post-Independence*

During the post-independence (post-9 August 1965) nation-building years, the Singapore Church continued to evolve in its ministry to attend to the social and practical needs of the community. In 1966, a Singapore Industrial Mission was formed to serve the needs of residents at the Jurong industrial estate, which was an economic experiment established by the Singapore government.<sup>177</sup> Also in 1966, Wesley Methodist Church and St. Andrew's Cathedral jointly established the Churches' Counselling Service to provide counselling services to individuals and families.<sup>178</sup> The leaders in the Counselling Service subsequently launched the Samaritans of Singapore (SOS), which continues to serve the community today, providing a 24-hour telephone counselling service to anyone in need. Today it is the only suicide-prevention centre in Singapore.

Meanwhile, a Rev. Khoo Siaw Hua was serving as Prison Chaplain in Changi Prison. The Commissioner of Prisons invited him to provide spiritual guidance to those in prison, saying to Rev. Khoo, "these boys fear no man nor law, but try to get them to fear God".<sup>179</sup> Driven by the conviction to "set the captives free", Rev. Khoo ministered to many inmates from 1953 to 1985, inviting many of them to experience freedom in the Kingdom of God. Of the 18 prisoners who were hanged for their involvement in the Pulau Senang prison riots, and the murder of the prison colony superintendent Daniel Dutton and 3 prison attendants, on 12 July 1963,<sup>180</sup> all of them eventually received Jesus as Saviour

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<sup>176</sup> Bobby Sng, *In His Good Time: The Story of the Church in Singapore, 1819 - 2002*, 3rd edn. (Bible Society of Singapore/Graduates' Christian Fellowship, 2003) at 220.

<sup>177</sup> Bobby Sng, *In His Good Time: The Story of the Church in Singapore, 1819 - 2002*, 3rd edn. (Bible Society of Singapore/Graduates' Christian Fellowship, 2003) at 252-256.

<sup>178</sup> Bobby Sng, *In His Good Time: The Story of the Church in Singapore, 1819 - 2002*, 3rd edn. (Bible Society of Singapore/Graduates' Christian Fellowship, 2003) at 256-258.

<sup>179</sup> Bobby Sng, *In His Good Time: The Story of the Church in Singapore, 1819 - 2002*, 3rd edn. (Bible Society of Singapore/Graduates' Christian Fellowship, 2003) at 258. Henry Khoo, *Shoes Too Big: Continuing a Legacy of Hope and Transformation* (Armour Publishing, 2007) at 11.

<sup>180</sup> Ho Ai Li, "18 hanged for role in Pulau Senang prison riot", *The Straits Times* (25 October 2015); Vernon Cornelius-Takahama, "Pulau Senang", National Library Board Singapore, Infopedia (2001). "Pulau Senang 18 to hang on Friday", *The Straits Times*, 27 October 1965 at 1.

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through the ministry of Rev. Khoo.<sup>181</sup> Born of Rev. Khoo's legacy is the Prison Fellowship Singapore, which continues this noble and difficult ministry of serving the needs of, and bringing the Gospel to, inmates and their families.

During those years, drug abuse was rampant and many drug abusers were trapped in a cycle of addiction and recidivism. Various Christian ministries initially sought to help and support the drug abusers to escape the initial effects and trappings of drug addiction. However, they soon realised that long-term aid was needed. Over the years, various Christian rehabilitation and halfway houses for drug abusers and ex-convicts were established. Many of these continue to do good work today, including The Hiding Place, The Helping Hand (founded 1987 by a former drug addict, Robert Yeo), Breakthrough Missions, Teen Challenge (founded 1976).

The Hiding Place was started in 1978 by 2 Singapore Bible College students, one of whom, Philip Chan, was a former drug addict, who were prior to serving drug addicts at the Opium Treatment Centre in St. John's Island, in response to an invitation by Rev. Henry Khoo, the son of Rev. Khoo Siaw Hua. This was known as the Christian Drug Ministry, which started in 1973. The Hiding Place was established as a residents live-in ministry in a Christian home. Breakthrough Missions was started in 1983 by a group of former drug addicts who were convicted by their faith to bring freedom to others like them. Today they have a residential rehabilitation programme and run a social enterprise providing a multitude of services (house moving services, car washing, art & craft, bookbinding, foot reflexology, etc). They run a cafe known as Breakthrough Cafe at People's Park Centre, opposite the State Courts, serving good dim sum and other food. There is great significance that many stakeholders in the legal system, including lawyers, judges and litigants, are frequent patrons of this ministry.

Singapore's rapid economic progress from third world nation at independence to first world nation at the turn of the 21st century was (inevitably) coupled with negative impact on the society. Changing social dynamics resulted in familial breakdown, rise in divorce rates, neglect of the elderly, rise in number of juvenile offenders, higher

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<sup>181</sup> Bobby Sng, *In His Good Time: The Story of the Church in Singapore, 1819 - 2002*, 3rd edn. (Bible Society of Singapore/Graduates' Christian Fellowship, 2003) at 258-259.

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prevalence of psychological and emotional problems. Many Christian institutions and ministries were set up to address these various issues and serve people in need. The denominational churches established various social services arms, e.g. the Methodist Welfare Services (founded 1981), Singapore Anglican Welfare Council, Presbyterian Community Services. Family Service Centres, Care Centres and other facilities were set up by various other Christian organisations and individuals. For instance, the Simei Care Centre, Care Corner, Chen Su Lan Methodist Children's Home, Fei Yue. The younger megachurches (younger compared to the denominational churches) such as New Creation Church (NCC), City Harvest Church (CHC) and Faith Community Baptist Church (FCBC) soon also established various social service and outreach ministries, e.g. NCC's Love Outreach Ministry, CHC's City Harvest Community Services, and FCBC's Touch Community Services.

### F. Reflections

This brief historical survey of Christians who have lived their lives administering justice and mercy is obviously not meant to be exhaustive. There are many individuals and ministries who continue this legacy today. For instance, Gary Haugen of International Justice Missions, World Vision, etc. But this survey is meant to highlight the solid foundation and tradition of the Church practising biblical justice and mercy for contemporary Christians to build on. In a conversation I had with a friend, he mentioned how Reformed local churches are skeptical and averse to any notion of social justice. It is ironic then that they adopt this attitude (if indeed it is true that they are so skeptical), given the beliefs and practices of the founding Reformers, Martin Luther and John Calvin, as we have seen in this chapter.

Indeed, the very least we can take away from this historical survey is the following question: ***if the Church has always had a deep conviction in, and clear expression of, biblical justice and mercy, where is this deep conviction and clear expression in the Church today?***

While it is true that in some of the examples mentioned in this chapter, biblical justice and mercy or 'social justice' as a concept was not foremost on the individual's mind or the compelling motivation for their actions, it is important to recognise what this

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perhaps reveals about biblical justice and righteousness as described in this book thus far. Which is that it is not novel, not unorthodox, and not fundamentally different from the Gospel or orthodox doctrines which have traditionally been understood in the global universal Church and in the mainstream evangelical Church in Singapore. It is therefore perfectly possible for a Christian to not understand or not be able to articulate biblical social justice and righteousness but be able to express and live them out in his life. Why? Because the whole counsel of, and all the precepts of, God properly understood and grasped would, with the help of the Holy Spirit, inevitably result in the expression of biblical social justice and righteousness in the believer's life.

Having considered the historical legacy of our faith community, it is appropriate to now look forward and explore what the present and future offer to us as challenges and vistas for the contemporary Church.

### **Reflection / Discussion Questions**

1. Which historical persons or examples did you resonate with? Why? What did you learn from this person or example?
2. How are you or your local faith community doing something similar to the historical persons or examples in this chapter? What can you learn from them?

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## 9. What's the state of social justice in the Singapore Church today? -- *Challenges and Opportunities for the Singapore Church*

### **E. Some Justice Issues in Singapore**

As we pursue social justice, it is important to understand the local context and pray for wisdom to negotiate the local environment so as to go forth and meet people where they are. For Jesus is already there with those in need, tending to their wounds and wrongs, and “[i]f anyone serves [Him], he must follow [Jesus]; and where [Jesus is], there will [His] servant be also”.<sup>182</sup>

Throughout the book, I have sought to raise pertinent examples, statistics, issues and anecdotes. However, these are non-exhaustive. People’s needs are constantly in flux; so must our just response also be dynamic. For the same reason, I decided not to set out in chapter and verse specific issues and needs. Nevertheless, I set out below a list of social justice areas and issues or communities which I think are pertinent in the Singapore context and some organisations started by Christians serving those areas.<sup>183</sup>

1. Social mobility and poverty. Intergenerational social mobility in Singapore (i.e. children of poor parents moving up in terms of socio-economic status) is increasingly limited. A significant number of families struggle with day-to-day needs as well as access to social participation in the community and economic opportunities.
2. Migrant workers and foreign domestic workers (FDWs). Common problems migrant workers face include food insecurity, poor access to healthcare, exploitative or abusive employment conditions, and social isolation. FDWs are especially vulnerable to lack of rest and day off, social isolation, verbal physical emotional and sexual abuse. HealthServe is a secular community development organisation started by Christians which serves migrant workers. Various

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<sup>182</sup> John 12:26.

<sup>183</sup> See generally Lien Centre for Social Innovation Social Insight Research Series, “A Handbook on Inequality, Poverty and Unmet Social Needs in Singapore” (March 2015).

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churches have specific ministries for nationality-based or language-based migrant workers and FDWs.

3. Elderly. As the Singapore becomes an increasingly ageing population, issues of loneliness, social support and affordable access to basic needs like food and healthcare become more pronounced. Many elderly suffer from various disabilities in their latter years, which then affect their emotional health. They are unable, or find it extremely difficult, to leave their homes and socialise. Many fall into depression. It was recently reported that more elderly persons are taking their own lives over the past 15 years.<sup>184</sup>
4. Environmental degradation and climate change. The socio-economically less advantaged are especially vulnerable to the adverse impact of environmental degradation because they are less financially able to mitigate against such adverse impact. Local examples would be the haze problem and rising outdoor temperatures. A Christian environment conservation organisation to note is A Rocha.
5. People with disabilities. Disability is not just an individual matter but a societal concern. With Singapore's increasingly ageing population, we can expect more elderly PWDs. While steps have been taken to increase the inclusion of PWDs into society, more could be done including increasing accessibility to public institutions and services by way of upgraded infrastructure and special services, incentivizing more employment opportunities for PWDs and schemes to build capabilities of PWDs so as to increase participation and contribution to society. Many churches have specific ministries for persons with specific disabilities, the most common being deaf and blind ministries. Touch Community Services has a Centre for Independent Living and a hostel for people with intellectual disabilities and a Silent Club for the deaf.

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<sup>184</sup> Janice Tai, "More seniors in Singapore taking own lives", The Straits Times (17 December 2015).

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6. The homeless. Contrary to Professor Kishore Mahbubani's (in)famous declaration that "[t]here are no homeless, destitute or starving people in Singapore",<sup>185</sup> there are in fact people living on the streets in Singapore.<sup>186</sup> You may find some of them in Toa Payoh, Bras Basah, Bugis, Chinatown as well as around Upper Serangoon and Upper Paya Lebar. Some of them may actually own homes but choose to live on the streets for various reasons.<sup>187</sup> In this regard, a shelter for homeless persons, New Hope Shelter for Displaced Individuals and Displaced Families, now located in Jalan Kukoh was started by a Pastor Andrew Khoo who was moved to start this after a few men and a family with 2 children sought his help for temporary shelter. Youth With A Mission (YWAM) has a trolley ministry which goes out on weekday evenings to befriend the homeless. A friend of mine from Hope Church also has a similar ministry in the Bras Basah, Bugis, Chinatown area. Likewise, Paya Lebar Methodist Church has a ministry reaching out to the homeless at the Upper Serangoon and Upper Paya Lebar area.
7. Sex workers. Many foreign sex workers face difficult social and economic problems back home and in Singapore. The numbers are uncertain but some foreign sex workers may be victims of human trafficking or smuggling syndicates. Geylang Bless God (Oikos Fellowship) is a ministry which reaches out to foreign sex workers in Geylang. Local sex workers face different problems from the foreigners and as a matter of understanding their needs and issues, may also be categorised with the local poor. A particular ministry under Youth With A Mission (YWAM) serves local sex workers.
8. Unmarried single mothers. Women who have unwanted pregnancies but who choose to keep their children face various social, legal and economic problems. For those who are lost as to whether or not to keep the child, the decision can

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<sup>185</sup> Kishore Mahbubani, "Following Singapore's lead on the road of development", Earth Times (15 January 2001).

<sup>186</sup> Justin Hui, "Six things you did not know about the homeless in Singapore", Youth.sg (30 September 2015): <<https://www.youth.sg/Spotted/People/2015/9/Six-things-you-did-not-know-about-the-homeless-in-Singapore>>. Justin Hui, "Not your average homeless guy", Youth.sg (22 October 2015): <<https://www.youth.sg/Spotted/People/2015/10/Not-your-average-homeless-guy>>.

<sup>187</sup> Justin Hui, "25 years a cardboard collector", Youth.sg (19 November 2015): <<https://www.youth.sg/Spotted/People/2015/11/25-years-a-cardboard-collector>>.

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itself be an extremely terrifying one to make. Dayspring New Life Centre is a ministry started by Christians which provide non-judgmental and holistic care and support for women in such situations. They provide counselling, referrals for adopting & fostering and family mediation, attend to pre- and post-natal needs, and have a shelter for women who have nowhere to go during their pregnancies.

9. Widows and orphans. Widows with children are especially vulnerable to hardship because in many cases, prior to their husband's passing, they were the stay-home parent. Many therefore find it difficult to obtain jobs or other economic opportunities thereafter.
10. Convicts and ex-convicts. Although societal attitudes towards ex-convicts have improved over the years thanks to campaigns like the Yellow Ribbon Project, which was initiated by a Christian (Jason Wong), it remains that many are still likely to be socially and economically excluded from the mainstream. This is usually due to other related issues, e.g. recidivism, drug relapse, inadequacy in specific skills. The Prison Fellowship is a well-established Christian organisation in this regard. Highpoint Residential Centre operates a residential rehabilitation programme for male ex-offenders struggling with addictions.
11. Gambling and other addictions. Besides the person struggling gambling addiction, the people most affected by this social ill are the family members who are likely to have their household financial resources depleted and may also be harassed by loan sharks. In some cases, the gambling addicts themselves are abusive to family members. A Christian organisation which ministers to gambling addicts is One Hope Centre. However, as society evolves and technology develops, new types of addictions other than the traditional smoking and alcohol addiction become more prevalent. This includes social media and gaming. Addictions can result in anti-social and even destructive behaviour. Touch Cyber Wellness helps young people with internet-related addictions.
12. Drug abuse and addiction. Even though the Singapore Government takes a severe stance towards enforcement against drug trafficking and consumption, drug abuse is increasing. More young persons are consuming drugs, and drug



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supply is constantly evolving with new synthetic drugs.<sup>188</sup> Drug abuse or consumption result in, or are perhaps caused by, other related social problems. A friend in the Prison Service told me that more than half of the inmates in Singapore's prisons have been involved in or are there because of drugs. That's an astounding percentage. Various rehabilitation centres and halfway houses are doing good work in ministering to victims of drug addiction. However, perhaps more can be done upstream to deal with root issues, in particular other social problems, to prevent and protect young people from falling into the snare of drugs.

13. At-risk youths. There are many children and young persons who experience the trauma of physical, sexual or emotional abuse or neglect from people in their family, school and social environments. As a result, such young people fall into a vicious cycle of social exclusion, abuse and other destructive behaviours such as delinquency, drug abuse, gambling, bullying, etc. Dayspring Residential Treatment Centre is an organisation started by Christians which provide a safe environment for teenage girls to rehabilitate and reintegrate into their social communities. Diamonds on the Street (started by Crystal Goh, whose interview transcript has been included in this book) works with at-risk youths to help them create meaning through the arts. Singapore Youth for Christ also has a Youth Guidance ministry working with at-risk pre-teens and teenagers. AG Home (formerly known as Andrew and Grace Home) is a shelter for juvenile delinquents beyond parental control and victims of sexual or physical abuse. Teen Challenge is another Christian Voluntary Welfare Organisation (VWO) which serves teenagers with social problems.

14. Mentally ill persons.<sup>189</sup> Mental illness remains to be one of the least understood type of illnesses in Singapore. This is aggravated in the Christian community where the distinction between spiritual / demonic influences and mental illness

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<sup>188</sup> Lim Yi Han, "More under-30s turning to drugs" The Straits Times (22 August 2015): <<http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/more-under-30s-turning-to-drugs>>.

<sup>189</sup> See generally Douglas Koh, Leslie Lim, *Mental Illness or Demonisation?* (Armour Publishing, 2007); John ting, *A Gentle Touch: Christians and Mental Illness* (Graceworks, 2014).

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*per se* is finely drawn. The Singapore Anglican Community Services has four psychiatric health rehabilitation centres focussed on the mentally ill and emotionally disturbed.

15. Foreign brides. Foreign brides in Singapore typically come here as mail-order brides of middle-aged or elderly low-income men. A high percentage of them are HIV-positive due to transmission from their husbands. Due to the legal and policy systems in Singapore, their immigration status is dependent on their husbands as they are typically not permitted citizenship or Permanent Resident (PR) status.<sup>190</sup> In some cases, their children's citizenship status may also be affected. In a recent case, a PRC woman who gave birth to triples was unable to register their citizenship because her husband had disappeared when she became pregnant.<sup>191</sup> Her own immigration status is limited as she can only remain in Singapore on social visit pass. The citizenship status of the mother and children will have significant adverse impact on access to basic amenities and social services. It was reported that in the aforesaid case, the PRC woman was lodging with a church friend and receiving help from a church. I know of only one ministry presently under a Methodist Church specific to foreign brides.
  
16. LGTBQI (Lesbian, Gay, Trans-sexual, Bi-sexual, Queer, Inter-sex). Possibly the most controversial, the Singapore Church needs to adopt an inclusive loving pastoral attitude while remaining clear about the biblical truths on God's design for gender, sexuality and relationships. Also, more safe communities for Christians struggling with non-heterosexual sexual desires and gender identity issues are needed. The Church also needs to critically examine its approach in the public square on this issue; mine the universal Church's resources on political theology to adopt a considered approach on engagement in civil society on one hand, and with or through the state on the other hand. The Singapore Church should be mindful not to blindly follow the trends and approaches taken in the

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<sup>190</sup> Amanda Wei-Zhen Chong, "Migrant Brides In Singapore: Women Strategizing Within Family, Market, And State" *Harvard Journal of Law & Gender* (2014) Vol. 37, 332.

<sup>191</sup> Aw Cheng Wei, "Woman unable to contact Singaporean husband: Now her triplets can't get citizenship here", *The Straits Times* (14 November 2015).

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West merely because it is the most visible.<sup>192</sup> There are a few communities and ministries specific to people struggling with LGBTQI and other sexuality issues. However, due to the sensitivity of this issue, none of them will be explicitly named here.

17. Humanitarian relief in, and refugees from, neighbouring countries. Singapore is fortunate to be sheltered from many types of natural and man-made calamities. However, many neighbouring countries in the region are often affected by such tragic situations. Extending the ethic of love for neighbour in our neighbouring countries is especially pertinent for Singapore Christians because of our geographical location and level of economic development. Relief.sg (RSG) is a Singapore-based humanitarian social enterprise started by a Christian which organises relief missions to help those affected by conflict, calamities and climate change.

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<sup>192</sup> See S Dhanabalan's speech, "The Church in Singapore-Time to Distance from the West?", Message at the GCF Annual Thanksgiving Dinner (5 September 2003).