

A Time To Speak

Discovering God's Call To Break The Chains of Injustice



Share an opportunity today!

'It is not the kings and generals that make
history, but the masses of the people.'

Nelson Mandela

'To stay quiet is as political an act
as speaking out.'

Arundhati Roy, author and Indian activist

'Is this not the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?'

Isaiah 58: 6



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Introduction

Welcome to this series of studies on speaking out for justice. During these studies you will explore the biblical call for us to be people who pursue justice for the vulnerable and to build communities that practise justice toward the oppressed. By the conclusion of the series you will have discussed what the bible means when it calls us to “do justice” (Micah 6.8) and how this might work out in your life and that of your church.

Each study consists of a four page article that participants are asked to read and discuss. Three discussion starter questions are included with each article.

It is best if you can read each article before you come to the study group. This allows you time to think through the issues and consider any questions you might have. Nonetheless, this is not essential. Time will be given at the start of each study to read through the article to be discussed that night.

Notes for Leaders

Group leaders are responsible for facilitating discussion within the group. We suggest that you adopt the following pattern for each meeting.

1. **Reporting:** Each study ends with group members making a resolution to do something. Begin each night with a chance for people to report back on how this is going. For the first night you may like to ask people what they are expecting to get out of this study series.
2. **Reading time:** It will take around 10 minutes for the average reader to read each article. Whether or not the article has been read prior to attending the group, invite each person to read it through again. Encourage them to underline things that seem important to them and to jot down any questions that are raised as they read the article through. *Even if you have distributed copies beforehand make sure you come to the group with a copy of the article for each person.*
3. **Initial responses:** ask people to share their initial response to the article. In particular ask them to:
 - Share anything they would like to clarify – was there any part of the article where they were unsure what the author was getting at?
 - Share any questions that the article raises for them or issues that they would like to discuss further. Make a list of these.
 - Share a word that describes their overall response – eg “challenging”, “difficult”, “nonsense”.
4. **Discussion:** ask the group to spend time discussing the article. You can use the discussion questions at the end of the article and/or the points raised in the initial response time.
 - Don’t feel that you have to get through any or all of the listed questions. They are simply there as a tool to help discussion take place.
 - Do try to make sure the discussion stays focussed on the main issues raised in the article. If the discussion starts heading in an unhelpful direction say something like “This is an interesting question but I think we’re getting a little off track. Maybe we can come back to...”

- Do try to give everyone a chance to participate. You can do this by directly inviting contributions from those who haven't spoken much. If one or two people are dominating a helpful approach can be "Thanks Bob, but before we hear from you again I'm really interested to hear what Mary thinks about that."
5. **Resolution:** At the end of each study give people five minutes to write down an action they will take as a result of the discussion. Ask them to write at the bottom of the article a sentence beginning with "I resolve to..." You may also invite people to share their resolutions. As the group leader keep a note of resolutions made so you can use them during the "reporting back" section.

Study 1. A Vision Splendid

Summary: Scripture presents Christians with a vision of the world God is creating, an earth community enjoying total well-being. For the human community this means all people enjoying a positive relationship with God; just, equitable and peaceful relationships with one another; and social, emotional and physical sustenance from the beauty and abundance of the earth. Scripture describes this as the 'kingdom of God', and calls us to live with this kingdom vision as the defining centre of our lives.

As I write this article my four year old son is playing a game on one of the three computers we have in our home. To Lachlan, booting up a computer, inserting a CD, loading a game and manipulating the keyboard to move characters around the screen is as natural a life experience as eating breakfast. He finds it incomprehensible that when his mum and dad were four years old there were no computers in their homes, nor in their parent's workplaces.

I blame Steve Jobs. Steve Jobs was just 21 when he and a friend, Steve Wozniak, invented the Apple Computer. Until then computers were a monstrous mass of vacuum tubes that occupied entire rooms. The two Steve's managed to take that mass of tubes and fit them inside a box small enough to sit on a desk. They were convinced their invention would change the world.

Jobs and Wozniak offered their handiwork to Atari. They weren't interested in big bucks - all they wanted was a salary and the opportunity to continue their work. Atari knocked them back. They offered it to Hewlett-Packard who also knocked them back. But Jobs and Wozniak would not be deterred. Jobs sold his Volkswagon, Wozniak sold his calculator, and with the \$1300 they raised formed Apple Computers. The company was named Apple in memory of a happy summer Jobs had spent working in an orchard. The rest is history.

By all accounts Steve Jobs is a visionary, and spurred by that vision he built a successful computer company. But Jobs soon discovered that if his vision was to reach fruition Apple needed greater management expertise. So he approached John Sculley, then President of Pepsi Co, inviting him to become CEO. There was absolutely no reason why Sculley should leave a highly paid position in a world leading company to work with a bunch of computer nerds in a fledgling industry. At that stage no-one but Jobs and a few visionaries had imagined what the world might be. Sculley turned Steve Jobs down.

Jobs wouldn't take no for an answer. He approached Sculley again. Again Sculley turned him down. In a last ditch effort Jobs passionately presented his visionary ideas to Sculley and asked Sculley a question that turned his 'no' into a 'yes'. The question was this: "Do you want to spend the rest of your life selling sugared water or do you want a chance to change the world?"

Jesus comes to us with the same question. Most of us spend our lives making sugared water, going to work to accumulate more possessions and perhaps finding space for God and the world in our spare time. But Jesus had a vision to change the world. His was the vision of the kingdom of God and he calls us to place it at the centre of our lives, to make it our reason for existence (Matthew 6.33).

But what exactly does that mean? Steven Jobs had a vision of a world where a computer sat on every desk in every home. What vision does God have for our world? I would like to briefly explore that question in this paper.

Isaiah's Vision Splendid

A good place to start is the vision expressed in chapter 65 of the book of Isaiah.

See, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I will create, for I will create Jerusalem to be a delight and its people a joy.

I will rejoice over Jerusalem and take delight in my people; the sound of weeping and of crying will be heard in it no more. Never again will there be in it infants who live but a few days, or older people who do not live out their years; those who die at a hundred will be thought mere youths; those who fail to reach a hundred will be considered accursed.

They will build houses and dwell in them; they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit. No longer will they build houses and others live in them, or plant and others eat. For as the days of a tree, so will be the days of my people; my chosen ones will long enjoy the work of their hands.

They will not labour in vain, nor will they bear children doomed to misfortune; for they will be a people blessed by the LORD, they and their descendants with them. Before they call I will answer; while they are still speaking I will hear.

The wolf and the lamb will feed together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox, but dust will be the serpent's food. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain," says the LORD.

This prophecy came to the people of Israel at a time when the reality they experienced was very different to the reality for which they hoped. Their country had been invaded in the late 6th century BC and the bulk of the population shipped off to foreign countries. After some years in exile, many Israelites had begun returning to their homeland with the commission to rebuild their society. Their high hopes and vibrant dreams quickly gave way to the experience of insecurity, poverty, hardship, and uncertainty. Life back in their homeland was nothing like they expected.

Into this situation Isaiah injects a fresh vision. Harking back to the stories of the creation, of a time when God, humanity and creature lived peacefully on an abundant earth, Isaiah saw a time when God would recreate the world. This new world would be inhabited by a people in whom God “delights” and who “will be a people blessed by God”. In the past Israel had failed to love and worship God and had failed to enact justice to the poor and oppressed. Instead of blessing this had brought judgement and instead of delighting God, had distressed him. But the future will not be a rerun of the past. The future will see a community living in right relationship with God, with one another and with the creation.

It is important to note that Isaiah’s vision was not limited to individuals enjoying a vibrant relationship with God. It possessed very material, ‘earthy’ dimensions. Isaiah speaks of a city where people enjoy peace and security, prosperity and abundance, long life and happiness. Such peace and security stand in opposition to Israel’s recent experience of war, conflict and invasion. Prosperity and abundance stand in opposition to a history of economic exploitation and inequality.

I’m reminded of an experience I had in Tanzania, Africa. I was sitting inside a Toyota Landcruiser, being driven across bumpy dirt roads to the home of a missionary who worked in the city of Arusha. We passed a quarry where women and children were sitting under a hot sun smashing rocks with their bare hands. To my horror I learned that they do this from sunrise to sunset in return for a daily wage of a mere dollar or two. This was not enough to feed themselves properly, let alone pay for schooling, medical treatment, house repairs, recreation, or save enough to get themselves out of this desperate poverty trap. It was not the workers who enjoyed the fruit of their labour, but the owners of the quarry. The people of Israel knew similar sorts of

exploitation and it's to this sort of experience that Isaiah's vision speaks when he says:

They will build houses and dwell in them; they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit. No longer will they build houses and others live in them, or plant and others eat. For as the days of a tree, so will be the days of my people; my chosen ones will long enjoy the work of their hands. They will not labour in vain, nor will they bear children doomed to misfortune.

This new world is one where not only do human beings practise love toward God. They also enact a love that ensures everyone shares in the wealth of the community and forsakes oppression, exploitation and violence.

Note that Isaiah's vision includes a healthy environment. In the last paragraph he speaks of a world where the wolf and lamb feed together. In speaking this way Isaiah evokes the portrait painted in Genesis 1-2 of a world in which humans and animals did not feast on one another but on vegetation, a world where there was a plentiful supply of food for all creatures, peace existed at every level of the created order and creation was free of any 'curse' that might make it unproductive. Isaiah's vision calls us to see that God's heart is not simply for humanity, but for the entire earth community and it's welfare.

So what relevance does a vision given to a group of Israelites six centuries before Christ have for us today? The relevance is that Isaiah's vision was not limited to the well-being of Israel. He looked forward not merely to a rejuvenated nation, but a rejuvenated planet. He gives us a snapshot of God's heart for the world. This is the sort of world God originally created. This is the sort of world God will recreate. And this is the sort of world God is starting to bring into existence even now.

Jesus points to this in the sermon he delivers in his hometown synagogue. Luke reports the story right at the beginning of his Gospel (4. 14-23), indicating this is the lens through which we should understand Jesus life and mission. Jesus quotes from Isaiah 61, a passage that spoke of one who would inaugurate the new world envisaged:

*"The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."*

It is easy for affluent westerners to spiritualise this text, to imagine Jesus is speaking to the “spiritually poor”, the “spiritually imprisoned”, the “spiritually blind”, the “spiritually oppressed”. But this misses the biblical framework. Both Isaiah and Jesus were speaking to communities that were heavily populated with the materially poor, the physically blind, the unjustly imprisoned, and those oppressed by injustice. His last sentence refers to “the year of the Lord’s favour”, a reference to the Old Testament year of Jubilee in which financial debts were forgiven, land was restored to its original owners, slaves set free. It is a time when everyone gets to make a fresh start as the social and economic systems that have created inequality and marginalisation are recalibrated. Jesus’ mission is nothing short of the recalibration and renewal of the entire created order! He declares that God’s mission to renew and restore the universe to love, justice, equity, and faith is taking place through him. In his ministry he set about this tasks and he calls his followers to join him in it.

We could summarise the biblical vision this way:

*God’s heart is for a world where the entire earth community enjoys well-being.
For the human community this means all people enjoying:
a positive relationship with God;
just, equitable and peaceful relationships with one another;
social, emotional and physical sustenance from the beauty and abundance of the earth.*

The Power of Hope

One of my favourite movies is *The Shawshank Redemption*. It’s a story of hope transforming the lives of prisoners in a harsh and brutal penal institution. Most of the prisoners have been unable to lift their sights beyond the walls of the prison house. When released they find it difficult to adjust to life in free society and perversely long to return to the harsh yet familiar prison environment. Andy, an educated man wrongfully convicted of his wife’s murder, teaches the men to think bigger, to dream of what one day could be. Andy himself dreams of a better life. Over many years he slowly and methodically concocts and executes an elaborate escape, exposing the corruption that has kept him imprisoned and fleeing to a new life in a faraway town. The film closes with the release of his best friend Red. Like many others Red struggles to adjust to life outside the prison, until he discovers an invitation from his old friend Andy to join him in the place they had long dreamed about. We find Red sitting on a bus, off to begin a new life with Andy, and he thinks out loud these words:

"I find I am so excited I can barely sit still or hold a thought in my head. I think it is the excitement only a free man can feel, a free man at the start of a long journey whose conclusion is uncertain...I hope I can make it across the border. I hope to see my friend and shake his hand. I hope the Pacific is as blue as it has been in my dreams. I hope."

This is the function of hope. It enables us to imagine our world not as it is, but as it could be, and in the Christian imagination, as it one day will be. Rather than paralysing us into the inaction of despair, hope drives us to start living out the values of the future and to start moving towards it.

This was the purpose of Isaiah's vision. He didn't remind that small, ragtag bunch of returned exiles of God's dream in order that they might abandon their tentative efforts to rebuild their society and simply sit and wait for God to do it for them. Rather, Isaiah was inspiring them to act. As they were gripped by that vision, its core hopes and values would become their core hopes and values, hopes and values they could then embody, however imperfectly, in the new world God and they were building.

The same is true for us. We live in a world where millions don't know Christ, where 30,000 children die every day from easily preventable diseases, and where greenhouse gas emissions are starting to challenge the capacity of rich and poor, human and non-human to enjoy the earth's abundance. But we are people of hope. We hear the good news that there will be a new heaven and new earth permeated with the presence of God and in which there is no more mourning, crying or pain. We both wait for this world and try to live out its core values and priorities even now - faith, faithfulness, justice, equity, stewardship, and more, and to see them extended to the whole earth.

Beyond Sugar Water to Kingdom Vision

In his famous "Sermon on the Mount" Jesus challenged his followers to lift their sights beyond a preoccupation with what they eat, drink and wear in favour of a life spent "seeking first the kingdom of God and God's righteousness" (Matthew 6). Jesus is not inviting his followers to tack on a few extra practises to their already busy lifestyles but to fundamentally reorient their living around God's kingdom vision.

For Australian Christians this means dumping lifestyles driven by a relational-consumerist vision. Consumerism sees enjoyment of the earth's abundance as life's central pursuit. In this vision our lives are made happy and meaningful by our capacity to enjoy things and experiences. This is not a bare materialism. Most people recognise that the enjoyment of things and experiences is much

richer when shared with people we love. And so we value family and friendship alongside consumption.

Enthralled by the relational-consumerist vision Australians devote their time, energy and skills to acquiring an ever increasing array of things and experiences and sharing these with a close network of family and friends. Money is key to this, not as an end in itself, but in providing the means to expand our range of choices – it enables us to build bigger homes, renovate, take more exotic holidays, pay for private schooling, etc. And given the almost endless range of possibilities, there is no end to the merry-go-round of acquisition.

The biblical vision calls us not to add a few “God” values to the relational-consumerist vision but to replace it with God’s vision. It calls us to construct lives centred around:

- a relationship with God for ourselves and *all* humanity
- the pursuit of justice, equity, peaceful relationships, and a share in the earth’s abundance for *all* humanity
- responsible care for and use of creation.

This makes the biblical vision inherently missional. Those who follow in the way of Jesus can never be comfortable walking the narrow relational-consumerist path in a world which falls so far short of the biblical vision, but will seek to embody the values of the world to come. We will stop making sugared water and take a chance with Jesus to change the world.

Questions for Reflection

1. The paper maintains that:

*God’s heart is for a world where the entire earth community enjoys well-being.
For the human community this means all people enjoying:
a positive relationship with himself;
just, equitable and peaceful relationships with one another;
social, emotional and physical sustenance from the beauty and abundance of the earth.*

Christians have sometimes constructed their vision for the world in far more restricted terms than this. For example, some see God’s heart as being for the human community but with little regard for the wider earth community (ie all creatures not simply humans). Others see God’s heart as

primarily for people to enjoy a relationship with himself and have no place for just, equitable and peaceful relationships with one another. Yet others individualise the message so much that instead of a vision for *all* humanity enjoying these things it's primarily about *me* enjoying all these things.

Do you think God's heart is as broad as the paper suggests? What implications does this have for more restricted views?

2. The paper suggests that most Australians operate out of a relational-consumerist vision. Do you think this is generally true? What would you add/subtract?
3. What vision animates you and your church? How might things look different if the full range of the biblical vision was unleashed in your life and the life of your church?

Study 2. Hungering For Righteousness

Summary: 'Righteousness' is doing what is right within relationships. This makes it important to understand what relationship responsibilities we have. Where mainstream Australian values suggest our responsibility is to do good to those in our circle of close family and friends and avoid doing harm to anyone else, the bible suggests we are called to do right toward God, and do good to others. In particular we are called to do good to the weak, the poor, the oppressed and the marginalised. The righteous not only avoid harming the poor but proactively seek their well-being. It is impossible to be 'righteous' and neglect the poor.

A few years ago a friend took me on a tour of the National Art Gallery. An art enthusiast, he led me from one painting to another and elaborated on the artist's life and vision. We eventually came to a painting I had seen on previous visits to the gallery but I had never been able to figure out. It was nothing more than a big black square...or so I thought. My friend asked me to look closely, which I did until I saw that the big black square was made up of nine smaller squares, each a slightly different shade of black. It was then explained to me that the painting is about the use of shade and colour and the subtleties that can be achieved.

The subtleties were lost on the stranger standing beside us. No sooner had my friend finished his eloquent explanation than this stranger turned to us, exclaimed "That's the greatest load of rubbish I've ever heard!" and walked off in disgust.

The stranger just didn't get it. He looked and looked but he just couldn't see what the painting was all about.

I'm still not sure if I get it, but one thing I know is this - reading the bible is often like my experience with the big black square. I'd walked past that painting a dozen or so times and I'd never stopped long enough to see that it was more than just a big black square. There were layers of meaning I'd missed. I find it like that with the bible. It's easy to skip through passages, thinking I know what they're all about. Yet when I stop to look closely I discover layers of meaning I had all too easily missed.

This was certainly my experience with Jesus' call to righteousness. Jesus used this term to describe the lifestyle his followers should craft. In his famous Sermon on the Mount (Matthew chapters 5-7) Jesus declared "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness" (5.6) and those who "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake" (5.10). Followers of Jesus are to be sincere and thoughtful in how they perform "acts of righteousness" such as charitable giving, fasting and prayer (6.1-18) and in contrast to those who centre their existence on material well-being they are to "seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness" (6.33). Indeed, if we wish to see God's kingdom our "righteousness" must surpass that of the Pharisees (5.20), a group of people renowned for their commitment to righteousness!

If we take Jesus seriously, the pursuit of righteousness is not something to be relegated to the periphery of our lives! Rather, it must be one of the defining centres.

But what exactly is it? What is Jesus calling us to when he urges us to be preoccupied with "righteousness"?

What is "righteousness"?

For a long time I thought I had a pretty good idea what "righteousness" meant. To be righteous was to be right with God, which had a twofold sense. First, it was to be declared by God to be in right relationship with him, a status obtained not by being good, but by placing my faith in Christ. Second, it was to try and live like someone who is right with God, to seek out God's commands and obey them.

All in all, this understanding is not too bad. It is however very limited. It's like looking at the big black painting and seeing only two of the nine squares that make up the picture. And when we're talking about something as pivotal as righteousness that's a serious shortcoming!

When I explored the issue of righteousness further, I discovered it is far broader than my previously limited understanding. Ultimately it is a relational concept. Bible scholar Christopher Wright sums it up this way:

"When applied to human actions and relationships, [righteousness] speaks of conformity to what is right or expected – not in some abstract or absolute generic way, but according to the

demands of the relationship or the nature of the situation.” (C Wright, Old Testament Ethics for the People of God p256)

Or to put it in simpler terms: “righteousness is doing the right thing by others”. God is righteous when he does the right thing to humankind and creation by both calling us to account for our behaviour and in keeping his promise to save. People act righteously when they do the right thing by God, by others and by the creation.

A quick glance at Ezekiel 18 illustrates the point:

Suppose there is a righteous man who does what is just and right. He does not eat at the mountain shrines or look to the idols of the house of Israel. He does not defile his neighbour's wife or have sexual relations with a woman during her period. He does not oppress anyone, but returns what he took in pledge for a loan. He does not commit robbery but gives his food to the hungry and provides clothing for the naked. He does not lend to them at interest or take a profit from them. He withholds his hand from doing wrong and judges fairly between two parties. He follows my decrees and faithfully keeps my laws. That man is righteous; he will surely live, declares the Sovereign LORD. (Ezekiel 18.5-9)

In this passage the “righteous” person is the one who does the right thing in relation to God, his family and friends, the poor and needy. This same theme continues throughout the bible. In Proverbs, for example, the righteous are those who follow the ways of justice (8.20), speak words that build others up (10.20-21), trust in God rather than riches (11.28), make just plans (12.5), care for the needs of their animals (12.10), despise what is false (13.5), live blamelessly (20.7), rejoice in justice (21.15), give generously to the poor (21.26), rule equitably (29.2), care about justice for the poor (29.7), and detest dishonesty in others (29.27).

Righteousness is to recognise that we have responsibilities to others and to fulfil those responsibilities. I am a righteous husband when I am faithful, nurturing and responsive to my partner; a righteous father when I care for, guide and protect my children; a righteous employee when I work diligently and honestly; a righteous son when I show due respect to my parents; a righteous pet owner when I ensure my animals are fed and have freedom to move; a righteous friend when I listen to and encourage my friends; a righteous creature when I worship and serve my Creator; and so on.

Righteousness and The Poor

If righteousness is recognising and fulfilling our responsibilities to others, it is vital that we ensure we have recognised all our relational responsibilities. It is at this point that a biblical concept of righteousness clashes significantly with a typically Australian one. Australians tend to operate on the basis that a person should do good to their family and friends and avoid doing harm to anyone else. That is, a person is generally seen as “righteous” (ie having done what they ought) when they proactively look out for the welfare of those within their closest relational circles, and of their immediate family in particular. Beyond this our responsibility is not so much to “do good” as to “avoid harm”. A person who extends themselves beyond their circle, for example via charity work, may be admired, but their example is rarely considered something we are morally obliged to follow.

The bible sees things differently. It suggests that our relational circle, and therefore our relational responsibilities, extend to all humanity, and particularly to those who are vulnerable, oppressed and needy. Not only must those who directly oppress the poor and needy desist from doing so, but we all have a responsibility to care for those who have been marginalised. Such responsibilities are described throughout the Scriptures – in the Laws given to Israel, in the “Wisdom” writings (Proverbs, Psalms, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon), in the Gospels and in the New Testament letters.

Consider for example the prophet Isaiah. His message can be boiled down to this: Israel has failed to meet its obligations to worship God alone and to care for the needy. Consequently God’s judgement was coming on the nation, to be followed by a future restoration of the nation to the righteousness that it should possess. In chapter 1 we read:

When you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide my eyes from you; even if you offer many prayers, I will not listen. Your hands are full of blood; wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight! Stop doing wrong, learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow.
(Isaiah 1.15-17)

Such argument continues throughout Isaiah’s 66 chapters. In chapter 58 for example, Isaiah confronts the Israelites on the occasion of a national feast day. For all their calling upon God they have failed to act righteously toward the poor and needy:

Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter— when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?... If you do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk, and if you spend yourselves on behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday.

Such themes are maintained throughout the Scriptures. Read the Old Testament prophets and you hear these themes. Read the Gospels and you discover Jesus pronouncing woe upon the rich for failing to share their wealth with the poor (eg Luke 6.24-25; 16.19-31; 18.18-30; Matthew 25.31-46), and urging radical generosity toward the poor as a dominant feature of kingdom lifestyles (eg Luke 14:7-14; 16: 1-13). Read the New Testament letters and you discover James' declaration that "*religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.*" (James 1.17) and John's statement that *This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for one another. If any one of you has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in you? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.* (1 John 3.16-18)

There is one inescapable conclusion - you can't call yourself "righteous" and neglect the poor.

Returning to Jesus

In view of what we've seen so far let's return to the teaching of Jesus with which we began this study. Having pondered these texts I suspect we have a greater appreciation of what Jesus meant when he spoke of righteousness, called us to hunger and thirst for it, to centre our living on it, and to exceed the righteousness of the Pharisees.

In Matthew 23.23 for example, Jesus points out just how Pharisaic righteousness failed:

"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former."

In many ways the Pharisees deserve our admiration. They believed in one God, the God of Israel and refused to worship any but him. They trusted the Scriptures and were dedicated to obeying the law of God. But they had one major problem – they didn't understand what sort of people the law sought to make them. According to Jesus the righteousness God seeks is centred on “justice, mercy and faithfulness” and no amount of bible study or attentiveness to the detail of less central biblical commands can make up for a neglect of this.

Those “who hunger and thirst for righteousness” recognise that they are in relationship with God, with all humankind and with the creation, that these relationships make claims upon them, and seek to fulfil those claims. In particular, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness abandon a “harm avoidance” ethic and in its place embrace a “do good to all” approach to life.

Living Righteously

Speaking of righteousness as fulfilling our relationship responsibilities to God, humankind, and creation can sound exhausting! It may help to think again of Jesus' comment about seeking first God's kingdom and righteousness. In Matthew 6.25-34 he makes clear that this is not something we can simply add onto the lifestyle embraced by the world. Rather, it calls for a recrafting of our life values, activities and priorities. Jesus notes that the people of his day spent their lives in pursuit of food and clothing. This was understandable – most of them were quite poor. Yet his followers, Jesus says, must redirect their time and energy around another pursuit – God's kingdom and righteousness.

This is an important perspective for us. Australians live in a consumerist age. Whereas the people of Jesus' day (and of poorer nations today) struggled to acquire the things they needed simply to sustain their lives, we have attained such a state of prosperity that we can not only sustain our lives but select from an array of “lifestyle options”. We can holiday on the South Coast, in Fiji or in Europe. We can surf the net, entertain ourselves on a Playstation, go to the movies, watch movies at home, and acquire plasma TVs. We can send our kids to state schools, low fee paying non-government schools, or elite non-government schools. We can play cricket, netball, soccer, rugby, Aussie rules, swim, run, surf and more. We can learn violin, piano, flute, trumpet and guitar. We can earn more by upgrading to a Master's degree, postgraduate certificate or additional trade course. The options go on almost without end.

Our material prosperity has reached such a height that it has become exhausting. No matter how much we have, we are aware we could have more.

There are always more holidays to have, more instruments to learn, more books to read, more movies to view, more certificates to attain. And once we've attained them there's always the promise that our lives could be enriched even further by upgrading to a faster internet connection, a larger, higher definition TV, a bigger and better house, a more luxurious and newer car...

Pursuing a biblical righteousness while remaining addicted to consumption is an impossible task. It is necessary to fundamentally realign our lives, to recognise that every choice we make has an opportunity cost. When I choose to indulge myself in an orgy of spending (that by the standards of my neighbours may even be considered quite modest) I am choosing not to give that income to the poor. When I choose to work long hours to finance the lifestyle I desire I am choosing not to spend that time involved in ministry to those in emotional, spiritual or material need. When household members are continually rushing out the door we are choosing not to spend time together simply enjoying one another's company. When I exhaust myself running around having new experiences (or carting others to them!) I am choosing to expend my energy here rather than spend it nurturing my relationship with God and others.

I am not suggesting a simplistic "one size fits all" solution. For example, I thrive on busyness and being around others, where some people get thoroughly stressed by this. Some who have young children find they function best as parents when they engage in full-time paid work, whereas for other parents this destroys their parenting capacity. There is no rule I can give to say "do this, don't do that". Rather, I suggest we simply begin from the principle that a consumerist lifestyle and a righteous lifestyle clash and each of us seek to craft an existence based on righteousness.

Questions for Reflection

1. One of the greatest dangers for Christians is that we'll repeat the error of the Pharisees – we'll be committed to a godly living, but our understanding of what that means will be too limited. What do you see as the central dimensions of Christian living? How do these match up to the claims made in the article about righteousness?
2. The article suggests that Christian lifestyle of "doing good to all" is radically opposed to the Australian lifestyle of "doing good to my close circle of friends while filling our lives with as many experiences and things

as I/we can”. Do you agree?

3. What changes could be made to our lifestyles to enable us to build our relationship with God and build the well-being of the vulnerable and needy?

Study 3. Reclaiming Our Prophetic Voice

Summary: According to Scripture the primary responsibility of government is to serve the good of the people and in particular to protect the rights and well-being of the poor, the weak and the marginalised. One of the primary responsibilities of the church is to remind leaders of this responsibility. In the Old Testament this function was fulfilled by the prophets. They called kings to protect the interests of the poor. In the New Testament era this responsibility falls to Christians as they remind national leaders that “Jesus is Lord”.

Let us begin this paper by posing a question: what are the primary responsibilities of governments? A children’s story may help with an answer.

Once upon a time there was a kingdom of monkeys that was ruled by a very large and very wise monkey king. The monkeys lived near a stand of mango trees and enjoyed a constant supply of these delicious fruits. One day the monkey king noticed a castle being built downstream from the mango trees. He ordered the monkeys to gather all the mangoes from the trees. They dutifully responded, and collected all the mangoes, bar one that was hidden behind a bird’s nest.

One day this mango fell from the tree into the river. The human king who inhabited the recently built castle was taking a swim when the mango floated by. He picked it up and ate it. So impressed was he that the human king determined to gain more mangoes and set out with his guards in search of the mango trees.

When the human king found the mangoes he also found the monkeys. The monkeys were willing to share the mangoes but the human king decided he would have all the mangoes for himself. He ordered his soldiers to slay the monkeys.

The soldiers chased the monkeys through the forest until they came to the edge of a tall cliff. The monkey king knew that if he could get his subjects to the other side they would be safe. But how to do it?

The monkey king took his huge body and used it to form a bridge between the cliffs. One by one his subjects climbed over him to safety. The king grew increasingly wearied and bruised, but knew he must hold on. As the monkeys scrambled across their king grew ever weaker, yet

still be held on. Finally, when the last monkey had crossed the bridge, the monkey king collapsed.

The human king witnessed the whole scene from high on the hill. He was so moved by the monkey king's sacrifice that he ordered his guards to rescue him. The guards found the monkey king, barely alive, and brought him back to the king. The human king ordered his best doctors to care for the monkey king. When the monkey king finally regained consciousness the human king asked "You are their king, why did you bother to die for them?"

The monkey king replied, "Because I am their King". And with that, he died.

The story of the monkey king reminds us that true leadership is about servanthood. It is also a lesson we learn from Jesus. Given Jesus demonstrated God's basic mode of operation, servant leadership is not a departure from the norm, but is the norm for God. Consequently it is the norm for leadership everywhere, whether that be in the realm of church, politics, community or corporations. Leaders are entrusted with one basic commission – to serve.

A good example is found in the advice given to kings in the closing chapter of Proverbs.

The sayings of King Lemuel—an inspired utterance his mother taught him. Listen, my son! Listen, son of my womb! Listen, my son, the answer to my prayers! Do not spend your strength on women, your vigour on those who ruin kings. It is not for kings, Lemuel - it is not for kings to drink wine, not for rulers to crave beer, lest they drink and forget what has been decreed and deprive all the oppressed of their rights. Let beer be for those who are perishing, wine for those who are in anguish! Let them drink and forget their poverty and remember their misery no more. Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy. (Proverbs 31)

Lemuel's mother is concerned that her son will use his power to indulge in destructive pursuits when his core responsibility is to serve the rights of the poor and needy, to be attentive to those powerless to defend themselves.

This is consistent with the approach we find throughout the Scriptures. They continually emphasise that one of the prime responsibilities of any government is to protect the welfare and the rights of the vulnerable. This is why the prophets repeatedly focus on the failure of Israel's leaders to protect the rights of the poor and vulnerable. Power is never to be used to consolidate wealth and privilege in the hands of the few, but to ensure that all citizens share in the

wealth and life of the community. (See for example Isaiah 1.10-17, 9.6-7, 10.1-2; Micah 3.1-4.5; and Amos 3-5)

This calling was not restricted to the leaders of Israel. The biblical writers understood that it belongs to the leaders of all nations. The book of Amos, for example, commences with a proclamation of judgement on the leaders of Damascus, Gaza, Tyre, Ammon and Moab for abuses they have perpetrated upon their fellow human beings (see Amos chapters 1-2).

The book of Daniel tells of a dream of Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar dreams of an enormous tree “*visible to the ends of the earth. Its leaves were beautiful, its fruit abundant, and on it was food for all. Under it the wild animals found shelter, and the birds lived in its branches; from it every creature was fed.*” (4.11-12). The tree is cut down until it is just a stump and, taking on human characteristics, descends into madness before being restored to its prior greatness. Daniel interprets the dream. The tree stands for Nebuchadnezzar. He has great power but God will strip it from him until he acknowledges God as the source of all authority. When this occurs, Nebuchadnezzar’s rule will be restored. Daniel spells out what it means for the king to acknowledge that his reign is the gift of God – “*Renounce your sins by doing what is right, and your wickedness by being kind to the oppressed*” (4.27). The message is clear – kings are to ensure that all under their reign enjoy a share in the abundance of the earth (the large tree providing food for all creatures) and to do this they must ensure that oppression ceases.

A similar message can be found in Ezekiel’s discussion of the wickedness that brought judgement upon the cities of Sodom (Ezekiel 16.49-50) and Tyre (Ezekiel chapters 26-28). Sodom was destroyed because “*she and her daughters were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy. They were haughty and did detestable things before me.*” (verses 49-50). Tyre fell from dizzying heights because her rulers were seduced by their own power. Imagining themselves to have the godlike power to do whatever they wished “*through your widespread trade you were filled with violence*” (28.16).

Why This Emphasis?

The emphasis is consistent – governments are responsible to enact justice, end oppression, and ensure all their citizens share in the prosperity of the earth. This emphasis flows from some fundamental biblical values.

First, the earth belongs to God. This means that human beings must never consider themselves to be owners of the earth and its resources. Governments

are not free to do with the earth and its resources as they please but must utilise them in a manner that conforms to the values and purposes of God. This explains the bible's condemnation of governmental pride and arrogance.

Second, the abundance of the earth was gifted by God to all the earth's creatures (human and non-human). This makes it sinful for any individuals or groups to hoard or overuse resources at the expense of others. Thus the bible's strong conviction that governments must use their power to ensure all people share in the wealth of the community and its condemnation of rulers who enrich the powerful at the expense of the poor.

Third, the responsibility to "rule" creation belongs to all humanity (Genesis 1.26-28). Governments rule on behalf of the people. This explains the bible's emphasis on rulers serving the people.

Fourth, the command to "rule and subdue the earth" is closely linked to our being created in God's image (Genesis 1.26-28). We are to rule creation as those who reflect the image and likeness of God. That is, all governing must reflect the core values and themes we examined in the first paper in this series.

The bible nowhere argues for a particular mode of government, whether that be a monarchy that enacts laws governing every area of life or a liberal democracy that limits governmental authority to matters of public life and leaves 'private' morality in the hands of individuals. What it does insist is that whatever form of government is employed must give expression to the values we have outlined.

Who speaks for God?

So what happens when governments fail in their responsibility? During the notorious apartheid era, for example, the South African Government abdicated its responsibility to secure justice and equity for all its citizens and allowed wealth and power to be concentrated in the hands of the few. Among the victims were Joe Slovo and Ruth First, leaders in the African National Congress. They were murdered by a parcel bomb mailed by the South African police force. When apartheid ended, their daughter, Gillian, travelled extensively across South Africa, seeking to help in her country's healing and restoration. In the process she came across many of the children of white South Africans who had been active in the oppression of non-whites. One woman, a journalist of similar age to Gillian remarked to her: "I know it must have been hard for you to be your parent's daughter. I know that there are many costs to be paid by the child of heroes. But imagine how it feels to be

me: to have to look at my parents, and to ask of them – how could you? How could you have witnessed all this and said nothing? How could you have let it happen?"

This tragic story threatens to repeat every time governments fail to enact justice. In these instances who calls Governments to account? Who speaks for God?

The answer was clear for biblical Israel. When the Israelites demanded a human king God advised them that it was a bad idea (see 1 Samuel 8-10). A human king would not only centralise government, he would centralise power and wealth. Wealth that had previously been shared would be concentrated in the hands of the king and his political allies, segments of the population would become enslaved, and the powerless would be oppressed. In spite of this warning the people maintained their demand for a human king.

God granted their request but at the same time dramatically enhanced the role of the prophet as a check on kingly power. When kings wandered from their God-given responsibilities they were confronted by the prophets. The prophet spoke for God and called the king to act justly, mercifully and humbly, reminding the king that he was accountable to God, the one true king.

With the coming of Jesus the people of God are no longer identified with any particular nation operating under laws given by God. We are scattered among the nations yet it is arguable that we inherit the mantle of the prophets. When we speak the gospel we call on people to repent of their sin and turn in faith to Christ and his ways. This is precisely what the prophets did. Sadly, under the influence of individualism we all too easily neglect the implications of the gospel for leaders and societies. Yet if it is true that our governments are responsible to enact justice and equity for the poor and vulnerable, then speaking the gospel to our leaders must include calling them to fulfil this responsibility. And if the church doesn't speak, who will?

Modern Day Prophets

History is replete with instances of people of courage and conscience who took up the prophetic mantle - William Wilberforce standing against the slave trade in Britain, Mahatma Ghandi standing against British colonisation in India, Martin Luther King standing for civil rights in the USA, Aung San Suu Kyi standing for freedom in Burma. But there are many, many more.

Consider for example the situation in Bulgaria in World War 2. Bulgaria was an ally of Germany and a plan to send Bulgaria's Jews to German concentration camps had been made. This was thwarted when some parliamentarians pressured the Minister for the Interior to rescind the deportation order.

However, not all regions received notice that the order had been rescinded. In Plovdiv, Bulgaria's second largest city, Jewish people were rounded up during the early morning and held in the local school hall awaiting deportation by train to Germany. Metropolitan Kyrill, the head of the local church acted immediately. He sent a telegram of protest to the king, threatening to lie across the tracks in front of the first train to leave with Jews. He then went to the school where he was barred entry by the police. Announcing that he no longer felt himself bound by the laws of the government and would act according to his conscience as a minister of Christ, Kyrill climbed the fence promising the Jews gathered there "Wherever you go, I'll go." When news of the rescinding order arrived at Plovdiv the Jews were able to return to their homes.

Foiled at their first effort the German Gestapo pressured the king to order that Jews be expelled from cities into the Bulgarian countryside. They hoped this would stir up anti-Semitic feelings and allow the deportations to go ahead. In response, Metropolitan Stefan, the head of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, convened a meeting of his church's Synod that unanimously condemned the order.

The government made plans to go ahead anyway, scheduling the deportations for a day of national celebration, in the hope that they would go unnoticed among the day's festivities. Stefan would have none of this. As head of the national church it was his job to officiate during the celebrations. Standing on the steps of the cathedral, a large crowd lay before him and the members of the government, including the Prime Minister, sat behind him. He threw away his prepared speech, strongly condemned the persecution of the Jews and called on the government to resist the influence of the Nazis. The Prime Minister rose after Stefan to denounce him and called on him to stop interfering in political matters.

The deportation to country areas went ahead but Stefan was unbowed. In the face of threats that he would be arrested he offered to christen all Jews who were willing, for this would mean they could not be deported to Germany. The Minister for the Interior responded by refusing to recognise all christening certificates issued after January 1 1943, and ordering the closure of the churches of Sofia. Stefan informed the government that his churches would ignore the order and sent a circular to all his parish priests explaining the fate

awaiting Jews in Germany. Fearing a public backlash, the government backed down. The churches remained open until the end of the war and the Jews were allowed to remain in Bulgaria. Tens of thousands of lives were saved all because people of good conscience refused to be silent in the face of evil.

Owning Our Heritage

This is the prophetic heritage of the Christian church. It is the task of every generation of believers to identify the great injustices of their time and then refuse to be silent in the face of them. It is our calling to raise our voices on behalf of the poor, the vulnerable and the needy and to proclaim the gospel without fear or favour not only to our neighbours but to those who wield power in our society.

Questions for Reflection

1. This paper argues that one of the primary responsibilities of any government is to protect the rights and interests of the poor, the vulnerable and the needy. What do Australians generally look for from their Governments? How high a priority do we make of justice and equity for the most vulnerable?
2. In the paper, it was argued that the bible does not mandate any particular form of government. Most governments in biblical times were authoritarian monarchies. Australia is a secular, liberal democracy. To say we are secular means the Government will not make any particular religion the “endorsed” or “official” religion of the nation. All religions will be given equal protection and freedom under the law. To say we are “liberal” means governments must always respect basic human rights and freedoms (eg freedom of religion, freedom of speech, freedom to follow one’s conscience, etc). This provides a significant limit to governmental power. To say we are a democracy means that governments must be accountable to the population for what they do.

For Christians this is an important reality. It means we must not expect the government to impose Christian values on the population. In a secular, liberal democracy individuals choose their values. We are able however to insist that governments defend the rights of the poor and needy, for that is part of their responsibility in a liberal, secular democracy.

In this light, make a list of the issues that Christians often look to governments to do. Which of these is reasonable to ask within the context of a secular, liberal democracy (ie which of these are a matter of defending the rights of the vulnerable and which are an attempt to impose or preference Christian morality)?

3. In what ways do you see Christians and churches speaking to power today? Can you give examples of those who are doing well in “taking up the prophetic mantle?” How do you and your church fare in this department?

Study 4. A Time To Speak

Summary: Christians are called to “do justice”. Advocacy is an important way to achieve this. Advocates call on those with power to use their power to implement justice for the poor, the oppressed and the marginalised. Although not often valued within the Christian community, history shows that ordinary people advocating for justice can achieve great outcomes.

In the book *Daughter of the Killing Fields* (Fusion Press, 2005), Theary Seng tells the horrifying story of her family’s flight from Pol Pot’s murderous Cambodia. Included is the account of her great Aunt and Uncle’s unsuccessful attempt to enter Thailand. Having reached the border, Aunt Nan and Uncle An are part of a group of refugees met by Thai soldiers determined to block their entry to Thailand. At gunpoint the group is herded to the top of a mountain and told to walk back into Cambodian territory. The valley floor is riddled with landmines. From atop the mountain An and Nan hear the thunder of exploding landmines detonated by the footsteps of those forced to return before them. One family refuses to move. The father is shot through the head and when the rest of the family run away they are mown down by bullets. With the stench of death and fear around them, An and Nan reluctantly accept their fate. They head toward the valley floor, treading over the corpses of those who have gone before, knowing that the mines in those places have already been detonated. Miraculously they make it through alive.

Tens of thousands of Cambodians died this way. The practise only ended, Theary Sen reports, when Radio America exposed the practise and the international outcry pressured the Thai Government to stop it. Without this pressure thousands more would have been killed.

This is an example of advocacy at work. It is the sort of work the biblical prophets undertook and the people of God undertake today when they declare Jesus, not Caesar, is Lord.

Advocacy is nothing more and nothing less than *the act of influencing the powerful to act in ways that benefit the poor, the marginalised and the oppressed.*

Advocacy in the Bible

The Scriptures are filled with examples of people who had a ministry of advocacy. The prophets of the Old Testament confronted the kings and other leaders of their time, declaring that these leaders had acted unjustly and calling them to repentance. Esther took on the role of advocating for her people when their very existence was threatened by the genocidal plans of Haman. She recognised that “it was for such a time as this” that God had put her in a position where she could speak to and influence the king. Jesus consistently advocates for the welcome and inclusion of the poor, the ‘sinful’ and the marginalised. He turns over the tables in the temple when he sees how the temple system is being used to exclude people from worship of God and challenges the Pharisees purity system that excludes those deemed ‘unclean’. The apostle Paul takes up the cause of runaway slave Onesimus in the letter to Philemon.

What Do Advocates Do?

Advocates attempt to influence Governments, corporations and consumers to act in ways that benefit the poor, the marginalised and the oppressed. In a democracy such as Australia, advocates generally have four major strategies:

1. ***Appeal to the powerful.*** Advocates can appeal directly to politicians, community leaders, and business leaders to act in ways that bring about justice for the world’s poor and oppressed. For example, advocates might visit their local Member of Parliament to raise issues or write letters to a corporation that is treating its workers poorly.
2. ***Appeal to the public.*** Advocates may try to raise public awareness of an issue with the aim of establishing a critical mass of voters and consumers who care enough about the issue to change their voting and buying habits. This places pressure upon the powerful to act justly. The pressure is twofold. First there is the pressure of moral shame and secondly there is the pressure of naked self interest as politicians realise they need to change to win votes and corporations realise the need to change if they are to keep their customers.

Activities that can be effective in public appeal are things like: education campaigns in churches; protests, marches, and vigils; petitions; letters to newspapers, speaking on talkback radio, press releases; and awareness raising events that attract media attention.

3. ***Appeal to the law.*** The poor, oppressed and marginalised are often unaware of their legal rights. Effective advocacy can often be the result of helping them to discover these, with those who are in a more powerful position calling upon the authorities to enact the legal rights of the oppressed. For example, the International Justice Mission based in the USA prosecutes cases around the world on behalf of those who are powerless.
4. ***Appeal to God.*** Prayer is a key dimension of Christian advocacy. Advocates bring the situation of the poor, oppressed and marginalised before God, pray specifically for them, and cry for justice to be done.

The Tone of Advocacy

People sometimes think of advocates as militant activists parading down streets chanting angry slogans and being hauled away by police. While this is one expression of advocacy it is not the only one and frequently, not the most effective.

It is possible to be effective in advocacy using a more peaceful and conversational tone. This second approach is sometimes known as “soft” advocacy. Soft approaches seek to engage the powerful in an ongoing relationship and dialogue. They seek to affirm the good that the powerful are doing, as well as persuade them that more can be done. Public campaigns that tend to be less adversarial, aiming to persuade rather than condemn and affording advocates an opportunity to build rather than burn their bridges with the powerful.

Interestingly, both “hard” and “soft” approaches can be found within the pages of Scripture. The prophet Elijah was forced into a highly confrontational approach with King Ahab and the prophets of Baal. Ahab so despised Elijah that he made him an outlaw, searched high and low to arrest him (1 Kings 18:10) and dubbed him “the troubler of Israel” (1 Kings 18.17). Elijah for his part publicly denounced the king, culminating in an emotion charged and violent confrontation between Elijah and the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18). By contrast the relationship between the prophet Nathan and King David was much more friendly and respectful. Nathan could speak positively of the king (eg. 2 Samuel 7), yet when necessary the relationship provided a context where he could issue a very strong challenge (eg 2 Samuel 12). In the pages of the Gospels, Jesus engages in “hard” advocacy when he overturns the tables in the temple and publicly denounces the Pharisees as hypocrites, “whitewashed tombs” and a “brood of vipers”! At other times his

advocacy for others is much more conversational, such as his defence of the woman who washed his hair while he was dining with Simon the Pharisee.

In the Australian context a soft approach is usually preferable and generally most effective. Scripture encourages us *“If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone”* (Romans 12:18), urges us to recognise Governments as an authority established by God (Romans 13.1-13) and invites us to pray for those in authority (eg 1 Timothy 2.1-3). These injunctions give a presumption in favour of a soft approach. At the same time Scripture recognises that Governments can behave in ways that are evil (eg Revelation 13) and should be called to repentance (eg the Old Testament prophets). This demands that we call our Governments to repentance where they are acting in unjust or graceless ways. It may be that there are occasions in which Governments and corporations have become so evil that a very “hard” approach is justified, but more frequently, a soft approach is able to maintain a balance between affirmation and critique.

Does Advocacy Work?

Advocates sometimes feel overwhelmed by the size of the issues they confront and wonder whether their hard work can possibly achieve anything. The reality is that, very often, advocacy succeeds in bringing change. Very well known examples abound: the non-violent protest movement led by Mahatma Gandhi that resulted in the independence of India; the abolition of slavery in Britain as a result of the advocacy efforts of William Wilberforce; the US civil rights movement led by Martin-Luther King; the recognition of native title after the court battles of Eddie Mabo. Successful advocacy stories also abound on a smaller scale. Here are some examples:

Successful Advocacy for Lahu Children in Thailand¹

The Chiang Rai Christian Service (CRCS) in Thailand works with impoverished members of the Lahu tribe. Many Lahu families move from the hill regions of northern Thailand to the cities in search of work. CRCS staff noticed that Lahu children were excluded from local schools. After many patient and gentle visits to local school Principals arguing the case for these children, the schools started admitting the Lahu children.

¹ Source of information – personal conversations with staff of Chiang rai Christian service in November 2005.

Successful Advocacy for Garment Workers in Mexico²

Kukdong International is a Korean-owned garment factory located in Mexico. It manufactures clothes for a range of companies, including Nike and Reebok. In the year 2000 workers started to protest at the terrible conditions they experienced in the factory. These included poverty level wages, rancid worm-infested food (the factory promised free breakfasts and lunch to attract workers), verbal assaults and physical assaults with hammers and screwdrivers. When a strike was called in January 2001 riot police violently assaulted the workers.

Hearing of this situation, an American advocacy group launched a campaign focussed on students and administrators at US Universities. Nike and Reebok both produced clothing for many universities that bore university logos. The US advocates asked students and administrators to pressure Nike and Reebok to bring change in the Kukdong factory. The students were successful. Both Nike and Reebok intervened to improve the situation in the factories.

Successful Advocacy for Debt-Burdened Countries³

In the mid 1990's a group of people banded together to form the Jubilee 2000 campaign after learning that many poor nations were saddled with unmanageable debts. Instead of spending money on health, education and economic development, poor nations were required to spend massive amounts on spiralling debt repayments. The Jubilee coalition asked Western Governments to forgive the debts. The campaign grew from a small UK office with one staff member and 80 contacts into a movement that had national campaigns in sixty-nine countries and 24 million people signing on to its drop-the-debt petition.

Politicians noticed and massive debt relief was announced for poorer nations. Although much remains to be done, what has been achieved has freed up funds for many poorer nations to spend on essential social services. Social spending across all Highly Indebted Poor Countries has risen by 20%; Mozambique has been able to introduce a free immunisation program for children; school fees for primary education have been abolished in Uganda, Malawi, Zambia and Tanzania; and Uganda and Mozambique have been able to sustain economic growth rates of over 5%pa.

² Source of information: Liza Featherstone, *Students Against Sweatshops* (Verso, 2002)

³ Source of Information, Graham Gordon, *What If You Got Involved?* (Paternoster, 2003)

In December 2000 Gordon Brown, the British Treasurer (known in the UK as the Chancellor of the Exchequer), declared that when the history books are written they will say that the Jubilee coalition “achieved more standing for the needs of the poor...than all the isolated acts of individual governments could have achieved in a hundred years.”

A Time to Speak

One of the myths of the modern world is that “the average person in the street” cannot make a difference. History shows this to be a lie. Throughout history the refusal of ordinary citizens to accept situations of injustice has been a powerful force for change. When people come together with a just cause, a credible argument and a commitment to act, change happens.

This was certainly the lesson learned by one Jubilee 2000 campaigner, a member of the Mothers Union: *“I know that I, and thousands of other individuals, have made a difference to the world through our involvement. I can now trust that individuals and their faith and actions count.”*

Questions for Reflection

1. Have you had any experience in advocacy for justice? What were you advocating about? How did you advocate? What were the outcomes?
2. “Advocacy never works, nor is it something Christians should get involved in”. What would you say to this statement?
3. For many Christians, advocacy is a new experience. How do you feel about participating in advocacy activities? Which are you comfortable and uncomfortable with?