

SOCIAL JUSTICE:
A MANIFESTO TO THE *MISSIO DEI*
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The Texts

Isaiah 61

61 The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,
because the LORD has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;
2 to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;
3 to provide for those who mourn in Zion—
to give them a garland instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.
They will be called oaks of righteousness,
the planting of the LORD, to display his glory.
4 They shall build up the ancient ruins,
they shall raise up the former devastations;
they shall repair the ruined cities,
the devastations of many generations.
5 Strangers shall stand and feed your flocks,
foreigners shall till your land and dress your vines;
6 but you shall be called priests of the LORD,
you shall be named ministers of our God;
you shall enjoy the wealth of the nations,
and in their riches you shall glory.
7 Because their^{1a} shame was double,
and dishonor was proclaimed as their lot,
therefore they shall possess a double portion;
everlasting joy shall be theirs.
8 For I the LORD love justice,
I hate robbery and wrongdoing;^b
I will faithfully give them their recompense,
and I will make an everlasting covenant with them.
9 Their descendants shall be known among the nations,
and their offspring among the peoples;
all who see them shall acknowledge
that they are a people whom the LORD has blessed.
10 I will greatly rejoice in the LORD,
my whole being shall exult in my God;
for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation,

^a Heb *your*

^b Or *robbery with a burnt offering*

he has covered me with the robe of righteousness,
as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland,
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.
11 For as the earth brings forth its shoots,
and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up,
so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise
to spring up before all the nations.²

Luke 4:14-21

¹⁴ Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit,
returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread
through all the surrounding country. ¹⁵ He began to
teach in their synagogues and was praised by
everyone.

¹⁶ When he came to Nazareth, where he had been
brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath
day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, ¹⁷ and
the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He
unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was
written:

18 “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
19 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”

²⁰ And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the
attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the
synagogue were fixed on him. ²¹ Then he began to
say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled
in your hearing.”³

²*The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard
Version.* 1989 (Is 61:1-11). Nashville: Thomas
Nelson Publishers.

³*The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard
Version.* 1989 (Lk 4:14-21). Nashville: Thomas
Nelson Publishers.

*Social Justice:
A Manifesto to the Missio Dei*

The aim of this paper is to help the reader find herself or himself within this greater ongoing epic of a story narrated by God; it is for the Church to recognize its location in human history, particularly within the history of God's dealings with the people of Israel, and to identify itself as a "continuation of Biblical history."⁴ My hope is that the reader will recognize that social justice is a part of the ongoing mission and character of God, and as a part of the Church my prayer is that she or he will choose to participate counter-culturally in that mission as a 'continuation of biblical history.' May the reader recognize that God's character is drawn toward the poor, the captive, the oppressed, and the broken-hearted, and may they be spurred to act alongside the Spirit of God in order that good news be spoken to the poor, freedom proclaimed to the oppressed and the captive, and the recovery of sight given to the blind.

The approach that will be taken in this paper will begin by examining the given texts, Isaiah 61 and Luke 4:14-21. The correlation between these texts will be examined through exegeting the passages and seeing how the people whom Jesus spoke *to* in Luke, relate to the people Jesus spoke *of* in Isaiah; the title of this section is called *A People Gathered*. Next, in the section entitled *Who God is and What God Does* we will examine the character of God in comparison to the will of God. Theologically we will examine the ontological and moral claims of the *missio dei* that are identifiable through reading these two passages side by side. Subsequent to this, we will examine briefly in *Justice through Grace, not Vengeance*, how God's interactive love often stands counter-cultural to humankind's natural preconceptions. Finally, within the section titled, *A People Sent*, we will examine how God has invited his Church to join him on his ongoing mission and what the implications are for those who do so. It ought to be noted that while sectioned off, these categories often overlap; this should not be read as a distraction but as authentication to the character of God.

A People Gathered

In reading these two texts (Luke 4:14-21 and Isaiah 61) allow us first to examine Luke 4 and read Isaiah 61 in light of what is happening in the historical Jesus' context. Preceding the Nazareth pericope we examine what is taking place in Luke prior to Jesus' reading of Isaiah in the synagogue. Though too extensive to cover in great detail here, it may be worth noting that Luke seems to set up this particular passage in a way that ties Jesus' life directly to the servant of the Lord that is spoken of in Isaiah; we see this first with the foretelling of the birth narratives in Isaiah 7:14 and Luke 1:26-35. After the birth narrative, we see the baptism in Luke 3 and Jesus being filled with the Spirit paralleling the Spirit that brings justice to the nations being laid upon the servant of the Lord in Isaiah 42:1. And finally, after being filled with the Spirit and retreating to the wilderness where he was tempted, we have Jesus returning to his home town and beginning his ministry – he does so by proclaiming the mission that has been given to him from

⁴ Hays, Richard B. *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 113.

the Father by the Spirit. Jesus, who has yet to speak publically, we see in Luke sets up his first words to be central to the ministry that he is about to live out. These first words, this essential basis for his ministry, however, are not his own; his first words are those of Isaiah.

As we have briefly seen, both the build-up to this event as well as the context in which Luke places this event signifies that Luke himself regards the incident as exceptionally significant. “It stands as a ‘preface’ to Jesus’ entire public ministry, even as a condensed version of the gospel story as a whole. It is a ‘programmatically discourse’ which fulfills the same function in Luke’s gospel as the Sermon on the Mount does in Matthew’s.”⁵ These first words concerning the mission of God to reverse the destiny of the poor and oppressed become in Luke’s gospel “a sort of manifesto of Jesus: ‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing’ (4:21). The prisoners, the blind, and the oppressed (or the bruised) are all subsumed under ‘the poor’; they are manifestations of poverty, all in need of ‘good news’.”⁶ Luke portrays the tensions, persecutions, frustrations, theological and social problems that seem to stand outside the hands of time. Luke recognizes, if by no other way unintentionally, that there are indeed deep aspects of life that will remain significant to those who seek to advance the kingdom of God through the mission He has initiated far before, apparent even in Isaiah.

We see in Luke, when Jesus reads the Scripture from the scroll of Isaiah, that Scripture is the story that identifies God’s people. By reading from the particular passage of Isaiah that he did, Jesus is identifying his hearers, who claim to be God’s people, with God’s people from the Scripture of Isaiah. Luke sets his narrative within the larger backdrop of God’s plan to bring salvation to the world. This larger backdrop and connection to Israel allow Luke to better demonstrate that it is part of God’s ancient plan to include the Gentiles into the people of God. What he communicated to them, amongst other things, was that God was not only the God of Israel but also, and equally, the God of the Gentiles.

After observing this, “there can, therefore, be little doubt that, in Luke’s mind, the Nazareth episode has a clearly Gentile mission orientation and serves to highlight this fundamental thrust of Jesus’ entire ministry at his very first appearance in public.”⁷ This manifesto then speaks to the character of God and reveals to us that God’s will has always included acts of social justice.

Another interesting comparison can be noted at this point. We find that both when Jesus reads the Scripture of Isaiah in his given context, as well as when we read the Scripture of Luke in our given context, the message remains the same: scripture is read as a book of promises to God’s chosen people. We generally see these as “promises that have been made good in the dramatic events of Jesus’ ministry, death, and resurrection as well as in the subsequent experience of the church.”⁸ Within the larger whole we begin to see that the Christology in Luke is more functional: Jesus becomes understood in terms of what he has done and in the role he has

⁵ Bosch, David J. *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991), 89.

⁶ Bosch, 100.

⁷ Bosch, 89.

⁸ Hays, 113-114.

played in bringing about God's salvation to the world. "That is why Luke's use of Scripture is generally allusive rather than overt: he is not trying to prove that Jesus is, for instance, the servant of God prophesied by Isaiah; rather, Jesus fulfills God's promise to Israel by accomplishing the deliverance that the servant prefigured."⁹ This is why we see that in many ways it is not Jesus' death that restores 'recovery of sight to the blind' but rather, his ministry.

If Christ is identifying himself in these passages, it is done in order to identify his *ongoing* mission as well, the *missio dei*. "By evoking these texts at the beginning of his ministry, Luke's Jesus declares himself as the Messiah who by the power of the Spirit will create a restored Israel in which justice and compassion for the poor prevails."¹⁰

The announcement in the synagogue at Nazareth is a declaration that Jesus has been empowered by the Spirit to inaugurate the liberation of God's chosen people, and to continue this liberation through the lifeblood of the Church. In these passages, we see Christ both gathering and sending God's people. He gathers them from their roots as the people of God and sends them out into the world to continue his ongoing mission in the world. This programmatic declaration of his mission is a proclamation that the jubilee year of Leviticus 25 is at hand, a time when all slaves are freed, all debts canceled, and all property redistributed. When Jesus makes the declaration that this Scripture is now fulfilled within the hearing of his listeners at Nazareth, "he is pointing not just to some spiritual reality but to 'a social event',... it is a visible socio-political, economic restructuring of relations among the people of God, achieved by his intervention in the person of Jesus as the one Anointed and endowed with the Spirit."¹¹

Who God Is and What God Does

A beautiful and encouraging thing can be recognized in comparing Luke 4:16-21 to Isaiah. One begins to understand that the very Being and the very Will of God cannot be separated: the ontological and the moral find their life and unity in the revelation of Christ. Christ reveals to us that his Character and his Will, as God, are such that 'good news' and 'freedom' be proclaimed to the poor and the prisoners, that the oppressed be released. We see in his leading that to speak of Jesus means to speak of people reading Scripture, people encountering the kingdom, people meeting the Spirit. Jesus shows us that the character of God is about bringing his people out of slavery and exile; we see this in the repeated Old Testament themes and particularly with the people whom Jesus spent most of his time with during his earthly life.

If the Church is not in mission, then it is not the Church. This is the statement that is essentially being examined in Luke. The Church is not living to its potential as remnants of the character of God. Jesus' actions here set up both an ontological question as well as a moral question: the ontological question being, what is the character of God, and the moral question being, what is the will of God? By reading the specific passage from Isaiah that he does, Jesus identifies and clarifies what both the ontological and the moral entail. By stating that 'the Spirit

⁹ Hays, 114.

¹⁰ Hays, 116.

¹¹ Hays, 241.

of the Lord is upon me,' Jesus identifies himself as a part of the very being and character of God. By proclaiming the justice issues that he did, Jesus, in line with the prophet Isaiah identifies what the will of God is. Jesus affirms for us that God's actions cannot be differentiated from his character. Similarly, we begin to see in this pairing of particular passages that God does not have a mission, but God is mission. David Bosch says it grandly by stating that "Mission is an attribute of God rather than an activity of the church," and Jurgen Moltman adds to this by saying "It is not the church that has a mission of salvation to fulfill in the world; it is the mission of the Son and the Spirit."¹²

Jesus, in identifying his local social context with the context of the Israelites from Isaiah, shows us that ontologically God is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow. Morally, Jesus also identifies that what God does or intends to do is in resemblance to the very character that he holds; thus, what God does cannot be separated from who God is. Furthermore, we learn that at the very heart of God's character and will are social justice issues that span the hands of time. God's will incorporates the broken-hearted, because God's very nature is missionary.

To be a disciple of Christ is to listen and to follow in the ways of God. By reading Isaiah in his context, Jesus is showing the Church how they are able to participate in his nature, in God's very Being, and he tries to show them how they ought to live out the will of God as those who claim to belong to him. Jesus is stretching the imagination of his hearers because he is essentially asking that they pattern their lives in particular ways that pattern the character of the God to whom they belong.

Justice through Grace, not Vengeance

So, what would Jesus' audience have expected when they heard him reading from Isaiah 61? "The words were originally addressed to the Jews who had returned from the Babylonian exile, and who were 'grieving for Zion' (v.3), despondent because of their lost freedom and the destruction of their land."¹³ These former exiles were, in Isaiah 61, promised the total reversal of their present wretched conditions; they envisioned that they would recover due to the Lord's gracious permanent Jubilee. However, not only do we read in 61:2 that the prophet predicts the 'year of the Lord's favor' but we also read the prediction of 'the day of vengeance of our God.' These subsequent words anticipate a future where Israel will be served by their foreigners, instead of the Hebrews serving them. This too is how the text of Isaiah would likely be understood by Jesus' hearers in the first century; however, they would be expecting release from, and vengeance on, the Romans instead of the Babylonian authority. Thus, when Jesus reads Isaiah 61 in the synagogue, the congregation probably expected him to announce vengeance on their enemies, especially the Romans. Instead, however, when Jesus reads from the scroll of Isaiah he reads only up to the first part of 61:2, 'to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord' and omits 'and the day of the vengeance of our God.' In doing so, Jesus not only omits any reference to judgment on Israel's enemies but also reminds his listeners of God's compassion on those enemies, as we read later (4:25-26). Jesus proves himself, as the Anointed one of God, to be wholly different from what has been expected. Instead of justice occurring through vengeance,

¹² Bosch, 390.

¹³ Bosch, 109.

God's justice announces the year of the Lord's favor for Jews as well as for their opponents. Here we see God's character and will being marked more by grace than by vengeance.

The grace of God is key in understanding the two given passages. God does not sit with a black robe and gavel; instead, God is the agent of God's justice and righteousness. Jubilee is taking place, and judgment is set aside. There is a re-ordering of social structures that is taking place with an emphasis on the poor and other social outcasts. The norms of society are being disrupted and how God is perceived begins to make a shift in the minds of those who are hearing the message. This is particularly interesting when we reach beyond the given texts just a little further. Though Jesus is delivering a message of grace, the opposite of that begins to take place in the minds and actions of his hearers, vengeance begins to prevail. Those who were listening so intently to him and praising him (4:15), those who all spoke well of him and were amazed by his gracious words (4:22), began to realize the implications and exactly how counter-cultural his message truly was. Now, instead of praise and grace being reciprocated back to Jesus, vengeance and fury fill their hearts (4:28) and they attempt to kill Jesus right then. While Jesus is trying to express the grace that God has for his people and is trying to call them to imitate the character of grace which he has first demonstrated, his people act in the only way they have ever known. Instead of modeling their actions after the God whom they claim to worship, his people model their lives after what is comfortable, what society has told them about their God; they chose to follow the lead of their culture rather than their God. This example begins to show us how radical this message of grace and forgiveness is and how easy it is to place what culture and comfort over and above the leading of God.

A People Sent

In these passages, we see God both gathering and sending God's people. He gathers them from their roots as the people of God, accepting Jew and Gentile alike, and sends them out into the world to continue his ongoing mission in the world. There is a great visual imagery that is taking place within the narrative of Luke. We see particularly in this passage a coming together of the triune God. We have the Spirit of the Lord lying upon the incarnate Christ, handing over the mission of God, to bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and freedom for the oppressed. Next, we see this same imagery in Christ handing over this mission by delivering this fulfilled prophesy and ongoing mission to his listeners, to us. If *Jesus* is the embodiment of the *servant of the Lord*, then we take on that embodiment as followers of Christ. Thus, the practice of worship is the people of God. Daniel Bell paints this picture most beautifully in the following words:

Christ's work reveals that true justice is formed by charity and that its rule is mercy. Before Christians enact this justice, they receive it as a gift through the liturgical constitution of the Church as the Body of Christ. The liturgical reception of justice in turn forms the Church into the servant body that serves the world justly by extending Christ's gift of renewed communion in God. This the church does through the works of mercy. As a people whose life together is marked by the corporal and spiritual works, it embodies the justice of God that promises to liberate both oppressor and oppressed from

the agony of sin and gather all around the table of the Lord to share in the eternal bounty of divine charity.¹⁴

We spoke earlier about how by reading from the particular passage of Isaiah that he did, Jesus identified his hearers who claim to be God's people, with God's people from the Scripture of Isaiah. We spoke of how Luke sets his narrative within the larger backdrop of God's plan to bring salvation to the world and how this larger backdrop and connection to Israel allow Luke to better demonstrate that it is part of God's ancient plan to include the Gentiles into the people of God.

What then does this mean about the character and will of God? What then does this mean for us, as the hearers of Jesus' words, who claim to be the people of God? It means that we too are a part of a larger epic that is narrated by God. While Jesus reveals a great deal about his character as God, he also stands as the revelation to the will of God for his hearers. We see especially within the passages of Luke 4:14-21 and Isaiah 61 that God's character and God's will cannot be divorced. As was mentioned previously, Jesus shows us that the character of God is about bringing his people out of slavery and exile. We see this in the repeated Old Testament themes and particularly with the people whom Jesus spent most of his time. Jesus, through the reading of scripture, places his hearers into the narrative of God and tries to align them with the character and will of God that is being revealed through the actions of God. It begins to be revealed to us that "if Scripture points back to the pattern of God's action expressed fully in Jesus, and the kingdom points forward to the fulfillment of God's purpose expressed in Jesus, then God's people look to him to bring these gifts into their present life."¹⁵ He does this through the work of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit brings the remembered word of Scripture to life and transforms the anticipated hope of the kingdom into action. The same Spirit that came upon the anointed Jesus in Luke comes upon and spurs action in his church.

The Church is found in people reading Scripture and entering its narrative; even Christ did this in his reading of Isaiah and his proclamation of the fulfillment of prophecy. Moreover, the Church is found in people anticipating the coming reign of God; it is found in people being open to the work of the Holy Spirit in making Christ present to them. After reading these texts in light of the life and actions of Christ that we know, we especially see that the "the Church is found where Jesus spent most of his time: with those whose knowledge of their neediness led them to expect most from God; with people who knew they were in slavery and exile, and who longed for the liberation that only God could bring."¹⁶ Luke demonstrates the inclusiveness of God's saving plan by spotlighting Jesus' compassion for groups of people who were on the margins of society. Take quick notice of those who are among those listed by Jesus using the words of the prophet: the poor, the captives, the blind, and the oppressed. It is a list of people

¹⁴ Hauerwas, Stanley and Samuel Wells eds. *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 194-195.

¹⁵ Hauerwas, Stanley and Samuel Wells eds., 17.

¹⁶ Hauerwas, Stanley and Samuel Wells eds., 22.

generally regarded as lost causes, but who yet, at the hand of Jesus, come to know the blessings of God.¹⁷

Through the reading of any of the gospel accounts, one cannot help but be led to believe that Jesus Christ is a man of action and lives his ministry as he lives his life. Christ is not complacent and does not wait for people to come to him; rather, he believes in seeking out and helping even ‘the least of these.’ This is a model that must drive us as a church and we must participate in just such an interactive love as that displayed by Christ himself. As the Church, our theology of mission calls for a hermeneutic of the gospel in the midst of the concrete conditions of life, such as cultural identity and change, justice for the poor, encounters with human religions, building peace, caring for nature, and sharing the fruits, the joys, and the sufferings of life.

If we truly are to emulate Jesus that means that we too must be wild for a missional Church. This means that we are not to be the stench of lingering stagnant water, waiting for the flow of the Spirit to refresh us. Instead, it means that we have been given a model and a demonstration of how we ought to passionately live out our faith in the Church which has been given to us directly from God himself. In fact, we are empowered to live this out by the Spirit that God breathed into us. Thus, as was alluded to earlier, when we act in a way that is in accordance to the character of the God whom we worship, the way becomes congruent with the end; we become *who* we are, or more appropriately *whose* we are through the grace of God.

Conclusion

My aim has been that the reader may find herself or himself within this greater ongoing epic of a story narrated by God. As people who identify ourselves as the Church, my hope is that we begin to recognize our location in human history, particularly within the history of God’s dealings with his people.

My optimistic hope is that the Church will recognize that social justice is a part of the ongoing mission and character of God, and as a part of his Church my prayer is that the Church’s members will choose to participate counter-culturally within that mission as a ‘continuation of biblical history.’ God’s character is drawn toward the poor, the captive, the oppressed, and the broken-hearted, and it is the Church’s responsibility to be spurred to action alongside and through the Spirit of God to the end that good news may be spoken to the poor, freedom proclaimed to the oppressed, release given to the captive, and recovery of sight given to the blind.

We currently find ourselves within a ‘what’s next’ culture, constantly looking forward to what is going to happen. It is the norm of our culture and society to plan and arrange our own lives in order that they may be well-off in the future. However, Jesus is saying to us, as he did in that synagogue during the first century, that ‘the time is now.’ As the Church we are constantly looking at how God is forming us to be the people that he wants us to be, as if we will reach who

¹⁷ Willard, Dallas. *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God* (NY: HarperCollins, 1997), 120.

he wants us to be sometime later, in a more perfect, fulfilled life. However, we often forget who, or more appropriately whose we are now. We have to continually ask ourselves: is the means congruent to the end? We see that God's mission which includes social justice is an ongoing and continual action that speaks to and models his very character. We as the Church need to practice a non-identical replication of the character of God whom we worship. As the Church, we too need to recognize that the practice of social justice is the practice of worship, and we are called to worship.

Allow me to share with you a brief example from my own life. For years my wife and I have tried to discern what God's will is for our lives. We continually pray that God will reveal to us what he will have us do in the future. We both feel 'called' to some form of missions work, but neither of us really knows what that might look like for us. Through the numerous travels that each of us have been blessed enough to participate in at relatively young ages, we both at one time felt 'called' to overseas missions. However, through life experience since these travels, we both have also been blessed enough to work with the poor in inner city San Diego, with at-risk teenagers who come from broken homes, along with the physically and mentally handicapped that we find in our local hospitals. Through all of this we have begun to realize that there are many ways to follow the Will of God. When God calls us, God calls us to him, to his character. My wife and I are learning that the reason it is so hard to discern God's Will for us in the future is because our eyes aren't open to how God is forming us to his character now. Each of us is learning that we are called to missions because missions is part of the very nature of who God is. So, when we pray and ask God what he is calling us to, we have started to hear the words 'the time is now.' We have begun to hear that as long as we are bringing good news to the poor, proclaiming release to the captives, bringing recovery of sight to the blind, and setting the oppressed free, then we are acting in accordance with the will and character of God, for he tells us that "whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers or sisters of mine, you did also for me."¹⁸

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¹⁸ Matthew 25:40

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