

Book Review: Mae Elise Cannon's (2009) Social Justice Handbook

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Cannon, M. (2009). *Social Justice Handbook: Small Steps to a Better World*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

F. A. Hayek, author of *The Road to Serfdom*, once quipped that one of the best ways to destroy the meaning of a word was to place the adjective “social” in front of it. It is certainly true that the common understanding of important words drastically changes in such cases; to take just two examples, “contract” and “security” bear little resemblance to the phrases “social contract” and “social security.” Likewise, few phrases in the English language have produced more problems of definition and misunderstanding in recent years than “social justice.” The expression occurs in some 18th-century writings, such as the *Federalist Papers*, but its usage there to refer to obligations state allies owe to each other or to international rules of warfare bears little resemblance to its apparent definition(s) today. The Social Gospel author Walter Rauschenbusch, active in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, employed it to refer to an allegedly necessary forced redistribution of wealth in society, a sense much closer to contemporary usage. Pope Pius XI, by contrast, used the phrase to refer simply to the “norms of the common good” in his encyclical *Quadragesimo anno*, a document in which he also condemned socialism in all its forms.

In recent years, many evangelical authors and activists have attempted to appropriate the phrase “social justice” to refer to the various benevolence and advocacy programs in which their churches and para-church ministries are involved. One of these author/activists is Mae Elise Cannon, formerly of the ministry team at Willow Creek Community Church, the church famous for developing the “seeker-friendly” model of worship/evangelism, and now “executive pastor” of Hillside Covenant Church in Walnut Creek, CA. Cannon has provided an important glimpse into the assumptions and theology of the contemporary evangelical social justice movement with her *Social Gospel Handbook*, which is both a summary statement of the social justice thought developed in recent years by writers such as John Perkins, Gary Haugen, and Jim Wallis, as well as a series of calls to action for activists to work for “progress” on dozens of hot-button social and political issues.

Social Gospel Handbook is divided into two major parts. The first, shorter section, consisting of six chapters, attempts to lay the exegetical and historical groundwork for the evangelical social justice strategy. The first two chapters offer a definition for “social justice” that begins with an understanding of justice as simply “the manifestation of right action.” One might interpret this principle as being fairly straightforward; when one strives to obey God’s Law in one’s actions, justice results. Conversely, in Cannon’s formulation, injustice results from the abuse of power.

Cannon, though, argues that God’s demands on us go beyond what most Christians usually appreciate, particularly when it comes to the material inequalities we see around us each day. Unfortunately, in building

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her case for this plausible assertion, she falls prey to some logical fallacies. In a particularly dubious hermeneutical move, Cannon quotes 1 John 4:7-12, a passage dealing with relationships among Christians, and universalizes it, interpreting it to say that “when someone does not respond to the material needs of people around them [sic]—they [sic] do not have the love of God.” Similarly, Cannon universalizes Old Testament passages referring to the covenant nation of Israel to argue, for instance, that if Christians obey God fully there ought to be no poor people in the world. The presence of the poor either among us or in far-off lands is an injustice. Cannon believes, based on the situation that existed in the Garden of Eden, that justice is expressed “when God’s resources are made available to all humans, which is what God intended.” Christians, then, are required to move “beyond compassion to justice,” or in other words, not only to perform acts of charity to alleviate individuals’ suffering, but to take on problematic “power structures” to ensure a more equal distribution of goods and opportunities throughout the world.

After devoting a lengthy chapter to the history of Christian social action (both positive and negative) in the United States, Cannon argues that American Christians need to move “from apathy to advocacy,” or to devote more of their time and energy to addressing injustices in the world. She states that progress towards solutions to these problems can be made on the personal, church, and governmental levels. Cannon frankly admits that, under the influence of Jim Wallis (of the Sojourners organization and “God’s Politics” blog), her program became much more political because she came to believe that the American trust in the democratic system makes it a natural locus of reform efforts. It is not surprising, then, to find that the second major part of *Social Justice Handbook*, a series of two-to-three-page treatments of specific issues on which Cannon believes Christians should agitate for change, has a heavy political component.

The great majority of Cannon’s recommended reforms can be classified as Leftist, but readers who have noted the strongly egalitarian slant of the first part of the book will not be surprised. Where her Christian orthodoxy will not allow her to march in step with the Left, Cannon tends to advocate voluntarist solutions. For example, she recognizes that abortion is a grave sin. However, she does not call for political activism on this issue (a staple of the political Right), but rather Christian support of crisis pregnancy centers and organizations promoting adoption as an alternative to abortion. On the other hand, when it comes to many economic issues, Cannon endorses the Left’s agenda of political advocacy for legislation to mandate institution of such things as the “living wage.”

Many of Cannon’s prescriptions, based as they are on faulty inferences from scripture, are problematic. It is one thing to say that many things in this world exist as a result of sin. Poverty, for instance, is the result of Adam and Eve’s disobedience; God expelled them from Eden, and they had to toil to survive. It is another thing to say, as Cannon appears to do, that all effects of sin (such as poverty) are injustices that Christians have an obligation to work to redress. But this is not evident. To take just one example, the multiplicity of human languages is the result of man’s sin at Babel. Do Christians have a moral obligation to eliminate this multiplicity and restore a one-world language? On the contrary, we are told that linguistic diversity prevents mankind from fully manifesting its rebellion against God’s authority in certain ways, and that it thus exerts a healthy preventative influence. Likewise, our post-Fall natural state of poverty and the necessity of labor help to dissuade us from all sorts of sinful activity, as the old saying, “Idle hands are the devil’s workshop,” attests.

My point is not to excuse Christians from the duty of charity enjoined on us by Christ and the apostles, but to warn against our assuming that certain obligations (such as the care of widows) within covenant communities such as Old Testament Israel or the New Testament church automatically transfer to those outside those covenants. Such views stem from humanitarianism, not Christianity. That Christians today often equate these two things when they actually conflict at many points is a symptom of the reigning intellectual confusion in the church. (Herbert Schlossberg’s *Idols for Destruction* is an excellent resource for educating oneself on the incompatibility of Christianity with humanitarianism and several other modern

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ideologies.)

A related albeit less significant problem with Cannon's approach to poverty is her basic orientation towards the issue. The question is not, as she seems to think, "Why is there poverty in the world?" The question is rather, "Why is there wealth?" The answer is not a simple pointing to "unequal access" to resources. If the short, ambivalent discussion of capitalism in the second part of the book is any indication, Cannon and her sources have very little understanding of how wealth is produced through the accumulation of capital or how its production is inextricably tied to its distribution. To take the world's current level of wealth as given and to prescribe a far-reaching redistribution of it might satisfy the strongly egalitarian preferences of social justice advocates, but the consistency of these proposals with scripture, the historic Christian tradition, or economic law is far less clear.

Cannon shows a healthy appreciation of local efforts to relieve the suffering of others, but her focus on "power structures" and call to advocacy on all sorts of global issues run the risk of contributing to the phenomenon dubbed "the pornography of compassion" by Thomas Fleming in his important work *The Morality of Everyday Life*. In fact, I would recommend Fleming's work, which is deeply rooted in the classical and Christian natural law tradition (a tradition with which Cannon seems to have little familiarity), as a healthy corrective to many of the well meaning but potentially problematic proposals found in *Social Justice Handbook*. Fleming's examination of the "grave dangers" involved in substituting the language of justice for the more traditional language of charity in Christian social action is highly instructive, as are his warnings against placing faith in impersonal, bureaucratic organizations such as governments to accomplish the goals of relieving the suffering of others. Cannon is certainly correct that Christians have much more to do in the mission to bring the light of Christ to a fallen world; nevertheless, this book is evidence that the best of intentions do not always lead to the best prescriptions.

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