

# Evolving Church Conference

## Restoring Justice

March 24, 2007

### Introduction

The first session began with a video clip from [Tony Campolo](#), who's been in the news following an appearance on CBC this week. Tony talked about the dichotomy that's developed between gospel and social action, and reminded us that this dichotomy hasn't always existed. The gospel is not just about an individual's reconciliation with God; it includes that but it's more. Christians have always been concerned with issues of justice as well.

There is, Campolo says, an interactive relationship between individuals and society. We must not only preach a gospel that gives people freedom from sin. We also proclaim a gospel that transforms society. It's not one or the other; it's both.

### Plenary Session One - Ron Sider

The first session is [Ron Sider](#). Ron described three realities:

**One** - In the next 24 hours, 35,000 children will die from conditions we know how to fix. 1.2 billion people try to survive on a dollar a day. Another 1.8 billion live on two dollars a day.

**Two** - There are thousands of biblical verses about God's concern for the poor. Jesus said if we don't care for the poor, we go to hell.

**Three** - What Christians are doing. Stats show that Christians give about a quarter of a tithe to the church. People who live in the richest countries are getting richer, but are giving less toward the gospel and the poor.

The bad news is really bad. So what do we do? Ron developed three biblical themes:

**One** - According to the Bible, God is on the side of the poor. God is not biased; he cares about everybody. But he has special concern for the poor. He lifts up those who are oppressed and victims of injustice. It's all over Scripture. Jesus included this as a key part of his ministry

**Two** - God also acts in history to pull down rich powerful people. This shows up in the Magnificat, the prophets (Jeremiah 5, Isaiah 3, Ezekiel 16). Is God a Marxist? No! But God deals with those who become rich by oppressing others, or who are rich but don't share with others.

**Three** - If you and I claim to be God's people but don't share God's concern for the poor, we're fooling ourselves. That sounds like works righteousness. Where does it say that? Passages like Amos 5; Isaiah 58; Jeremiah 32, Matthew 25. There is more to the gospel than this - worship, etc. - but it's an important theme.

This isn't works righteousness. John Calvin said that if we claim to have saving faith but don't do the things that people do who have saving faith, then we don't have saving faith at all.

According to Scriptures, sin is both personal and social. Evangelicals have focused on personal sin; liberals have focused on social. In the Bible, God focuses on both. Examples: Amos 2. Robbing workers of a fair wage is just as evil as robbing a bank. Unjust laws are evil.

Some of the nastiest words in the Bible are spoken by Amos to the wealthy women of his day (Amos 4). They didn't see the connection between their wealth, their connection to a system that was unfair, to the poor. Sin is both personal and social. We need to think about sin in personal terms and in terms of structure and justice.

What is justice? If you look at biblical teaching on land, every family in the Old Testament owns land. Every 50 years, land reverts to its owners. Justice means that every person and family has access to productive resources, so that if they act responsibly they have access to what they need to live.

So what do we do? We have to ask what causes poverty. It would be nice if there was a simple solution. Some people are poor because they have made bad choices. There are many reasons for poverty: personal irresponsibility, sinful behaviors, structures of injustice. The market economy includes many areas of injustice.

How to change:

**Personal** - Live more simply so that others may simply live. We can use our money, time, and skills to empower the poor. Become unconditionally committed to the God of the poor.

**Church** - We don't need more glass cathedrals in an age of hunger. But it's not just about church construction. We need to learn to support each other to live counter-culturally. We can't do this alone. Small groups are an important part of this.

**Society** - One vote in the Canadian parliament can wipe out as much money as all churches give in a year. We need to get involved with politics and economics.

"When I feed the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why they're poor, they call me a Communist." (Dom Helder Camara)

A way to tell if someone is crazy is if you tell them to empty a bathtub with a spoon and they don't turn the tap off first. We do this - try to help individuals, but we're not so good at dealing with the source of the problem.

The good news: We are making some progress in health care, the population explosion, micro-loans.

We face a fundamental choice. We know what to do. We can focus on ourselves and get more and more rich, or we can decide that we know what God says about justice and the poor, and give our lives and resources to doing what God cares about, including poverty and the gospel.

What are you going to give your life to? More and more gadgets, or people? Will you respond to God's invitation and care about the poor the way that he does? If no, you can't call yourself a biblical Christian. If yes, he will use you.

## **Q&A**

We live in a society with a lot of injustice. A lot of our clothes and food is part of that system. How do we deal with that? The answer is not to refuse to purchase anything and withdraw. But we do need to distinguish between relative kinds of injustice. Some systems are more unjust. We can also study to find out what's going on, and boycott the worst. Don't feel overwhelmed with guilt. Do what you can as one finite person and keep working at it.

How do we talk about this in our churches in a consumer society? Don't feel completely bad about guilt - it is sometimes appropriate to feel guilt. Preach biblically and allow people to experience what you are. Selectively expose your people to what's happening around the world.

Most of the questions Ron answered were on micro-loans - an important issue but I didn't take many notes.

Lots of reasons for hope. For the first time, the most famous evangelical in the United States is talking about poverty. God is working!

## **Breakout Session - Shane Claiborne**

We've chosen a session with [Shane Claiborne](#). Shane is author of [The Irresistible Revolution](#) and founding partner of [The Simple Way](#), a radical faith community that lives among and serves the homeless in Kensington, North Philadelphia.

Shane grew up in northern Tennessee, which is about as far as you can get from inner-city Philadelphia. He grew up thinking that good people go to church. Some do, but it's not so simple. Sociologists say that those who go to church are more likely to be racist, pro-militaristic, etc. than the general population. We did a word association game and

asked people what they thought of when they heard a word. When we said church, they came up with words like bigot, hypocrite, hatred, boring. They did not say love, grace, community.

Some of what Shane said:

I volunteered on the Bush-Quayle campaign. I was pro-life but didn't offer to take in unwanted babies. I was against homosexuality but didn't know anyone who was gay at first. My struggle has been to humanize what I've talked about.

I began to see the world differently. I remember a church that was evicting homeless people from their property. Someone hung a banner over the church: How can we worship a homeless man on Sunday and ignore one on Monday?

All of the issues of social justice have bubbled up from my neighborhood. We don't choose issues, we choose people to come alongside. The issues come out of that. Only in living among people did I see the image of God alongside brokenness.

I used to leave my credit cards in my dorm room so they wouldn't get stolen when I was with the poor. Then someone broke into my dorm room, stole them, and used them at TJ Maxx. I was afraid of the wrong people.

I minister in Kensington, called the badlands, the poorest district in Philadelphia and one of the most beautiful. There is a lot of prostitution. 700 abandoned factories, 20,000 abandoned houses. There are more abandoned houses in Philadelphia than there is homeless people, and yet the waiting list for affordable housing is huge.

I began to see how broken our society is, and yet how God can move in this brokenness. I met a prostitute. I was sheltered back then and didn't know how to react. My wife and I invited her back and she recognized us as Christians. She said she used to be a Christian but lost all of that on the hard streets. We didn't hear from her for weeks until she knocked on the door one day. She came to thank us for praying with her, and said she's clinging to Jesus. She's been brought to life, has a husband and a kid now and her own house.

We can't just tell people that God loves them unless we're willing to get dirty with them, get into the sewage of the world and deal with what's destroying people. We can care about the poor but remain distant. Mother Teresa said it's fashionable to talk about the poor, but not as fashionable to talk to them. Like the story of Lazarus: do we know the name of the beggar at our gate?

Someone's said that we can ask the poor who the Christians are; they know.

We lose our focus. Example: a Christian with a 24 karat WWJD bracelet. Everything in our culture pushes us toward putting up walls. My mother didn't always understand. I didn't condemn her; I just invited her into what I was doing, and now she loves the peo-

ple and is committed to social justice. She used to pray that I would be safe; she now prays that I would be used by God. Maybe the most dangerous place to be is our places of safety where we're not living for God.

20% of the people has 80% of the world's stuff; that means that 80% of the people only has 20% of the world's stuff. There's enough for everyone's need, but not enough for everyone's greed.

The great tragedy in our church isn't that rich people don't care about poor folks, it's that they don't know any poor folks. Mother Teresa said that poverty wasn't created by God, but by you and I because we haven't figured out how to love our neighbors as ourselves. The early church figured this out.

This doesn't come out of guilt. It comes mostly from the realization that the gifts of God are too good to keep to ourselves. The best things to do with the best things in life is to give them away.

We're not socialists. When we live like Jesus, corporate capitalism won't be possible and Marxism won't be necessary.

We also need to learn about how to live in a global village. It means asking who the hidden and invisible people are behind my clothes and way of life and learn their stories.

We don't just need to protest; we need to pro-testify. We began to think about how to live together counter-culturally. Who are the people even in our lives, cleaning toilets in our buildings, who are living on minimum wage and whose names we don't know?

The more I live in my neighborhood, the more I see the power of people's stories. My Dad was in Vietnam, and I had views on war. It was only in the ghettos when I saw kids hitting each other that I realized we can't teach kids not to hit when we're trying to bring about God's peace through violence. This is what led me to Iraq with others as peacemakers when the bombings began.

When I got back from Iraq, people boycotted me when I spoke at chapels. When I told the stories about the kids, they were so compelling that even soldiers came forward who fired the missiles into Baghdad. They talked about feeling like they were living with two masters. We didn't demonize the soldiers either.

Every person has the image of God in them. God is moving through communities of faith, but it doesn't begin with grand visions. It begins with small acts. Bonhoeffer said that if we fall in love with our grand visions, it tears people apart, but if we are committed to love, it builds community everywhere we go.

Who knows how many nameless people there are suffering from brokenness, but I have faith that there are people of God loving them. God isn't saying to the poor, go find the church, he's calling us to serve him by serving the poor, the prisoner, the least of these.

God, give us a heart for social justice, but let us burn out of love from people we know. Give us eyes to see.

## Plenary Session Two - Jim Wallis

Jim Wallis of [Sojourners](#) is speaking. Wallis says that he it's important that we clear up the confusion about what it means to be Christian. People tell him that they didn't know you could be a Christian and care about poverty.

The story of Luke 14:15-24, the parable of the banquet tells us what God is like, Wallis says.

We tend to blame the poor on one side, or debate the causes of poverty on the other. Jesus points to something different: inviting them in. It's about a welcome table.

It's about inclusion, bringing people into community with us and incorporating their needs with ours. Poverty is resolved by bringing people into community and relationship.

It's also about justice. The Hebrew prophets are especially hard on those who oppress the poor. The God of the Bible is not a God of charity; he is a God of justice who holds kings and rulers and judges and employers responsible for how they treat widows, orphans, and workers about issues of land, labor, and capital. That too is rooted in a vision of right relationships.

Rick Warren has said that he's discovered the 2,000 verses about the poor. Wallis says that he knows what he means. Our Bibles have holes, and we've neglected entire sections. We're now putting our Bibles back together again. We can't say we believe the Bible unless we believe all of it.

A couple of kids heard Wallis talking about some facts: a six-year-old who weighs 17 pounds, the 30,000+ children who die each day from lack of water, food, and curable diseases. There's a silent tsunami killing people every day.

One of the kids said, "How come? Don't people know?" We know, but there are some reasons:

1. The poor aren't a priority. 800 million kids never go to school. The issue isn't money. It would take 5 weeks of Iraq. This won't change unless we bring the poor into community.
2. We have a debate over strategy. The issues are complex, and it's easier to debate them than to work on outcomes.
3. The issue is relationship. The facts of global poverty won't change until they become personal to us. When they become personal, it will change us and it will change the facts about poverty.

Bono went to Ethiopia as a young man. Someone handed him a child for a photo op, as happens often with rock stars. After, Bono handed the child back. The father said, "No, please take him. He will die if he stays with me." That changed Bono.

Bono spoke at the prayer breakfast. He said that God is with us when we are with the poor. He didn't say that God is with us when we are for the poor; it's when we are actually with the poor.

Isaiah 65 describes what God hates and God loves. This isn't a prophesy of heaven; this is God's vision and aim for human and institutional relationships. Those who ignore God and his issues are destined for poverty. On the other hand, God is creating a world of justice, joy, and hope. He invites us to join in. It will affect life spans, will allow people to enjoy the fruit of their labor, and will result in peace.

This isn't a utopian dream. A similar vision is in Micah 4:1-5. Peace and security are a result of just living.

The North American way, Pax America, has more to do with the military approach of Pax Romana. The early Christians challenged this. We have a competing vision of how the world should be. We have to make our choice.

The good news is that people making these choices. America is not the light and hope of the world. Jesus is.

What does it mean to speak of a revival of faith? We will not get to social justice without a revival of faith. Unless our faith comes alive in the world, education, programs, and policies will never be enough. A good example is the story of Wilberforce, portrayed in the film *Amazing Grace*. There is no way to understand his work without tying it to a revival of faith.

Early altar calls weren't just for invitations to salvation. It was to sign them up to the anti-slavery effort.

Politics is failing to address the biggest issues of the time. Normally when this happens, social movements rise up. The best social movements have a religious foundation. It's time to raise up a movement that will address the issues of those Jesus called the least of these.

It's happening. The religious right is being replaced by Jesus in America!

Wallis spoke at Ebenezer Baptist at Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s church. He started out weakly, but a brother started crying out, "Help him, Lord!" The more he yelled out the better Wallis preached. Later on, this man said, "No problem, son, I've raised up many a preacher in my day."

Ebenezer Baptist has raised up some of the best of our faith in America. It's time for these issues to be raised once again.

Bad religion pulls on our worst stuff: fear, divisions, violence. True religion brings out our hope, hunger for justice, and our faith. We've had a lot of bad religion, but something new is happening. It's time for a revival of faith and a revival of justice.

## **Q&A**

For the first time we have the information, resources, and technology to end extreme poverty as we know it.

The poor can't just be objects of our concern. They have to be our friends.

This isn't a utopian, ideological dream. We will never eradicate sin. But just as Wilberforce worked to end slavery, we can end specific areas of injustice. There are more slaves today than even in Wilberforce's day. Some of us this is as simple as mosquito nets, elimination of debt, and providing drugs to those with AIDS.

Bad eschatology has led us to devalue this world. It's because we know that the kingdoms of this world will become the kingdom of God that we are freed to live that way now. It's not about abandoning this world because we believe it's destined to get worse.

Desmond Tutu being interrogated: "You are powerful, but we know you're on the losing side. Since you've already lost, we invite you to enjoy the winning side!" Eventually everyone did join the winning side. When Mandela took power, there wasn't a white person in South Africa who wasn't always against apartheid. But we aren't needed at the party. We're needed now, in order to make the party happen. That is good eschatology.

Revival is happening now. The monologue of the religious right is over and a new dialogue has begun. The issue isn't them. The issue is what we do with our faith. I'm meeting a younger generation of evangelicals who are thinking differently. There are some trying to stop it, but it's like standing in a river trying to stop the flow.

Read Catholic social teaching.

It's personal again. I was taught that Jesus only cared about a personal relationship with him and not with issues like racism. God is personal but never private. God knows everything about us but wants a relationship with us anyway. And he calls us to carry out his agenda in the world.

I grew up believing that faith plus doctrine is what matters. James says that it's faith without works. Without that we're dead.

We can't be just about social action. Neither can we be about me and Jesus. We have to partner proclamation of the gospel with works. It's time for us to clear up the confusion.

Do we think Jesus' heart would not be broken by what we've done, or been complicit with, when it comes to our first nations? Shouldn't it break ours too?

You don't change direction by changing politicians who still hold their fingers to the air to see which way the wind is blowing. You bring about change by changing the wind. We are meant to be wind-changers.

## **Breakout Session - David Fitch**

David Fitch, author of [The Great Giveaway](#), is asking how justice works itself out in a smaller church (churches that aren't mega churches). How do we prevent justice from becoming big business? The danger is that we make justice a commodity and a technology. In other words, how do we prevent ourselves from turning justice into another program at our local church? Dave has already outlined some of his thoughts at his blog [Reclaiming the Mission](#) - parts [one](#), [two](#), [three](#), and [four](#). Justice cannot become just another thing that people have to do. It's what we do because of who we are.

It is easier to do justice at a distance. Our real challenge is to recover a connection between the local church and the poor. This requires resisting a few urges, and changing the emphasis in our preaching, our practices, and our patterns of life.

### **1. Resisting the urge to separate personal from social salvation**

I still believe in personal salvation, but we make a mistake when we separate personal and social salvation. It's both. When we separate the two, we have salvation on one hand and justice on the other. They were never meant to be separated.

We need to move beyond being justified to being justice-ified. Two theological concepts that may help us: other images of the atonement as well as penal substitution, such as *Christus Victor*. Also, the New Perspective on Paul, which brings out the social dimensions of the gospel.

Salvation fundamentally changes our relationships.

### **2. Resisting the urge to make justice about individual rights**

The move is from rights to right-eousness. Justice is not about individual rights. When it's about rights, what's mine is still mine, and what's yours is yours. We often define justice in terms borrowed from capitalism and democracy.

We must move beyond rights to righteousness. Justice and righteousness in the Old Testament are the same thing. It is more than about personal rights; it is about right relationship with God, human beings, and all of creation.

Our income, for instance, is not our own. God gave us everything.

If you want to change your church, do more than write a check. Become personally involved with people and get involved with them, not as projects but as part of your community.

### **3. Resisting the urge to make justice about politics**

We must move from politics to our politic. We must embody justice before we preach or lobby about it.

Fitch concludes, "We must move toward a more organic, local, embodied understanding of justice. The mega churches are not who we should be looking to for leadership here. The hurdles to embodied justice become greater the larger you get as a church."

## **Plenary Session Three - Shane Claiborne**

The last session is with [Shane Claiborne](#) of [The Simple Way](#). Some highlights:

We are in a world that is starved for imagination. We need a church with imagination. Jesus had great imagination - he never did anything normal. Jesus healed people, so he picks up dirt and spits on it and wipes it on his eyes. He answers a question about taxes by getting coins from a fish's mouth. He did this in a culture obsessed with cleanliness. As I read the things he says, I think, "What if we really believe he meant it?"

Story: a group of women who faced eviction from an abandoned Catholic church. They refused to be nameless and faceless.

The media got involved, saying that the church was evicting homeless people. They tried to use excuses, like the fire marshal. The night before, fire fighters showed up against orders to help them get ready for the fire extinguisher. They gave them fire alarms and smoke detectors and help them with exit signs so they met the standards.

Eventually they marched to the mayor's office and said, "You have no idea what it's like to live as homeless people. We invite you to walk in our shoes." They left their shoes at the mayor's office. They were creative.

[The Coalition of Immokalee Workers](#) were creative. They picked tomatoes that were used by Taco Bell. They protested but used a Statue of Liberty holding a tomato and all kinds of creative ideas to get their message across.

Philadelphia passed all kinds of laws against people being on streets, even against giving food to people. We wondered what to do. We decided to throw a party like what Jesus talked about and invite the homeless and poor. We brought drums and worshiped and we had communion. This is definitely breaking the law. The police didn't arrest us;

they decided to have communion. We would sleep out there in the park to bring attention to the laws.

One night the police were ordered in to arrest everyone there. We were woken up, put in handcuffs, and jailed. All kinds of lawyers offered to help. We used a homeless lawyer, though. I had a shirt on that said, "Jesus was homeless." The judge asked to see it. "I didn't know that," he said.

The judge said that the question isn't about whether we broke the law; it's the constitutionality of the law. The prosecutor objected, and the judge found us not guilty of all charges.

One of the times I was arrested they took my Bible. I asked why. The guard told me that it's still a dangerous book. I thought about it, and I realized he's right. Jesus calls us to holy mischief, to not conform to this world.

People in Scripture become radical non-conformists. They all look different, though. Matthew leaves barefoot; Zacchaeus becomes a different kind of tax collector. Whatever we do, we need to ask, "What does it mean to be a different kind of teacher, massage therapist. lawyer..."

We don't have universal health insurance which is crazy. We decided we wouldn't ask the government to do what the church is supposed to do, so we started pooling our resources to look after each other's health needs. The group is now up to 20,000 people, and we have met over \$400 million dollars in medical bills over the past twenty years.

Acts like this embody the gospel.

One thing that liberals and conservatives have in common is that they're starved for imagination.

Will we be extremists for hatred or for love? The world is starved to see Christian extremists for love and for grace.

One more story: We came across some money from a lawsuit and decided to take the cash, in coins, to Wall Street. We invited people. We blew a shofar and announced the Year of Jubilee:

Some of us have worked on Wall Street and some of us have slept on Wall Street. We are a community of struggle. Some of us are rich people trying to escape our loneliness. Some of us are poor folks trying to escape the cold. Some of us are addicted to drugs and others are addicted to money. We are a broken people who need each other and God... for we have come to recognize the mess that we have created of our world and how deeply we suffer from that mess - Now we are working together to give birth to a society within the shell of the old...

That vision of Jubilee is what we need. We need to dance to the music of a different world.

## **Q&A**

We're afraid of what we don't know.

If every home had a guest room and practiced hospitality, it would go a long way toward ending poverty.

A Baptist pastor once told us that he used to think we were missionaries to the neighborhood. He now thinks that we are learning from the gospel from the neighborhood, and are missionaries to the church. As we spend ourselves on behalf of the poor, our healing comes.

We pursue the American dream even in our churches and build mega churches with small groups and end up lonely. We drive our SUVs and work out at the gym rather than just riding our bike. I encourage churches to match their capital campaigns with a Jubilee fund to love the neighborhood.

"If I'm crazy, it's because I've decided to be different from the way that the world is crazy."