Justice and Mercy
Timothy Keller

I. THE BALANCE

Churches that thrive in cities should be characterized by an integrative balance of four ministry areas: evangelism, community formation, justice and mercy, and the integration of faith and work. Christians should seek personal conversion, deep Christian community, social justice, and cultural renewal in the city.

Many churches are committed to evangelism, preaching, and church planting, others to significant involvement with the poor. Some churches put great stress on fellowship and cell groups. There are also churches (usually called "artsy" by others) that are concerned about cultural engagement. But it is rare for a church to combine several of these emphases in ministry, and extremely rare to have them all. However, there is no reason to pit them against each other. The ministry of evangelism connects people to God, while community formation connects people to each other. The ministry of justice and mercy connects Christians to the needs of the whole city. Finally, the integration of faith and work connects Christians to the public life of the culture. When viewed this way, we see they do not contradict, but rather supplement each other.

II. CONNECTING PEOPLE TO THE CITY

God created both soul and body, and the resurrection of Jesus shows that he is going to redeem both the spiritual and the material. Therefore, God is not just concerned for the salvation of souls but also for the removal of poverty, hunger, and injustice. The gospel opens our eyes to the fact that all our wealth (even wealth we worked hard for) is ultimately an unmerited gift from God. The person, therefore, who does not generously give away his or her wealth to others is not merely lacking in compassion, but is unjust. Christian churches must work for justice and peace in their neighborhoods through service even as they call individuals to conversion and the new birth. We must work for the common good and show our neighbors we love them sacrificially whether they believe as we do or not. Indifference to the poor and disadvantaged means there has not been a true grasp of our salvation by sheer grace. Secular people have a strong belief that religion is really just about social power.

There is a need to place every church somewhere on the ideological spectrum from "Liberal/Left wing" to "Conservative/Right wing". But the gospel makes the church impossible to categorize: 1) Justification-by-faith brings deep, powerful psychological changes. Though I am sinful, I am accepted. This "converts" people. "My chains fell off, my heart was free; I rose, went forth, and followed Thee." On the other hand, the gospel of the cross and the kingdom brings deep powerful social changes. It defies the values of the world—power, status, recognition, wealth. The gospel is triumph through weakness, wealth through poverty, power through service. This changes our attitude toward the poor, toward our own status and wealth and careers. In sum: We do not want to emphasize mainly evangelism (as conservative churches do) or mainly social justice (as liberal churches do), but give a very high emphasis to both. A gospel centered church should combine "zeals" that are ordinarily never seen together in the same church. This is one of the main ways we make people look twice and take our message seriously. In "traditional values" America, a church can lack this combination and still have credibility. That is not the case on the "secular mission field".

In general "holistic" ministry should have three focuses:
1. Within the church community itself there should be radical sharing of economic resources. We should care for one another’s practical needs—economic, social, physical, medical, emotional—with the utmost generosity and care.
2. Within the immediate neighborhood the church should show its sacrificial love by the meeting practical needs of people whether they believe as we do or not.
3. Throughout the whole city the church should disciple Christians to band together into for-profits and non-profits that seek to serve and lift up the needy of the entire city.
A. Biblical-Theological Concepts

1. Service. Christians are to "serve"—diakonia. This word means to humbly provide for the most basic and simple needs through deeds. The root meaning of the word diakonia is to feed someone by waiting on a table. An example is in Luke 10:40, where Martha is preparing a meal for Jesus. A group of women disciples followed Jesus and the apostles and provided food and other physical needs, and this ministry is called diakonia (Matt. 27: one who sits at the table or the one who serves (diakonia) ?). This question is remarkable because in the value of the Greek culture of the day, it was considered highly demeaning. Plato said, "How can a man be happy when he has to serve someone?" Then Jesus makes the startling statement that Christian greatness is the polar opposite to the concept of the world's. "I am among you as one who serves (diakonia)." A diakonos! A busboy! This is the Christian pattern of greatness and the pattern of Christ's work. "If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth" (1 John 3:17-18).

2. Neighbors. It is typical for us to think of our "neighbors" as people of the same social class and means (cf. Luke 14:12). The Old Testament, however, called Israel to recognize the immigrant, the single-parent family, and the poor as neighbors, even if they were of another nation or race (cf. Lev. 19:34). In Luke 10:25-37 Jesus goes further. He says that your neighbor is anyone you come into contact with who lacks resources, even someone of a hated race or of another religious faith. Our responsibility to neighbors includes love and justice—two things which in the Bible are closely linked. When God says, "Love your neighbor as yourself" in Leviticus 19:18, he also says "Do not defraud, pervert justice, show partiality against the poor, or do anything to endanger your neighbor's life" (vv.13-17). According to Jesus, God is still a God of justice and anyone who has a relationship with him will be concerned for justice as well (Luke 18:1-8).

3. Mercy. Christians are to "show mercy"—eleos. This word is used to describe wholistic ministry in Luke 10:25-37 and James 2:14-17, two of the key passages in the Bible about wholistic ministry. James writes: "judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful" (2:13). "Mercy" sometimes has a general meaning, but sometimes it specifically refers to helping the poor and needy. What is the meaning of the word here? As Doug Moo says in his commentary, the context makes it clear. "What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, 'Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,' but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead" (James 2:14-17). The latter part of chapter 2 is famous for its seeming variance from Paul's own teaching.

James and Paul use "justify" to refer to different things. Paul refers to the initial declaration of a sinner's innocence before God; James to the ultimate verdict of innocence pronounced over a person at the last judgment. While a sinner can get into relationship with God only by faith (Paul), the ultimate validation [proof] of that relationship takes into account the works that true faith must inevitably produce (James). D.Moo, The Letter of James, pp. 141-142.

- The key verse is 2:24—So you see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone. There have been innumerable excellent studies and books that show that there is no actual contradiction here. ["We are saved by faith alone, but not by a faith that is alone."] • However, the controversy over the relationship of Paul to James has been masked what the "works" are that James asserts are absolutely, inevitably the product of saving faith. James says if you have faith but look at others without adequate resources and do "nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? Faith...if it is not accompanied by action, is dead" (2:16-17). What then are the "works" that James is talking about? He is saying something very radical: "A life poured out in deeds of service to the poor is the inevitable sign of any real, true, gospel-faith." • James essentially says the same thing in 1:27 when he ties the so-called "spiritual" and "social" aspects of living together into a seamless cloth. He writes: "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." Notice that along with a pure heart, untainted by worldliness (a very "conservative" sounding value!) is an equally important commitment to help those without social and
economic power (a very "liberal" sounding value!). James, unlike the contemporary church, has no trouble weaving them together; they are inextricably linked. Gospel faith in the heart inevitably expresses itself in such a life. Why would he say that? In James 1:9-10 he says that the poor Christian "ought to take pride in his high position," but the rich Christian "ought to take pride in his low position, because he will pass away like a wild flower." This is a wonderfully paradoxical statement. Every Christian in Christ is at the same time a sinner who deserves disintegration and death and an adopted child of God, fully accepted and loved. This of course is true if you are a Christian regardless of your social status. But James proposes that the poor person who becomes a believer would spiritually benefit by especially thinking about his or her new (in the gospel) high spiritual status, since out in the world he gets nothing but disdain. And on the other hand James proposes that the rich person who becomes a believer would spiritually benefit by especially thinking about his or her new (in the gospel) realization of sinfulness before God, since out in the world he gets nothing but acclaim. His worldly riches (his identity as a wealthy person) is spiritually worthless, it will pass away. Here we see why later James can say that concern for the poor and generous sharing of wealth is the inevitable sign of someone who has understood the gospel of grace. We are all spiritually bankrupt and saved by sheer generosity. The gospel gives us new identities that completely undermine the roles assigned to us in the world. This is reinforced in 2:1-4 where James warns Christians not to show preference or favoritism for the rich within the church. "If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothing and say, 'Here's a good seat for you,' but say to the poor man...'Sit on the floor'...have you not discriminated among yourselves?" The poor person, whose rough speech, manner, and clothing are disdained in the world, must not be treated disrespectfully in the community of Jesus. Nor should the wealthy be treated with inordinate respect. The world makes these things into bottom line identities. You are your social status and bank account—that is the basis for your self-value and self-regard. But in the gospel these things are demoted and made peripheral. Someone who does not show any signs of (at least gradual!) identity transformation along these lines does not give evidence of having really grasped the gospel. If you believe that you are saved by your goodness and merit, you will continue to base your identity in your performance and status and continue to evaluate people's beings in terms of their economic/social status. But if you are a sinner saved by grace that has to change. Thus James can say that faith without respect, love, and practical concern for the poor is dead. It's not gospel faith. Wow.

"Now dear Christians, some of you pray night and day to be branches of the true Vine; you pray to be made all over in the image of Christ. If so, you must be like him in giving...though he was rich, yet for our sakes he became poor’..."

Objection 1. 'My money is my own'. Answer: Christ might have said, "my blood is my own, my life is my own"...then where should we have been?

Objection 2. 'The poor are undeserving'. Answer: Christ might have said, "They are wicked rebels...shall I lay down my life for these? I will give to the good angels". But no, he left the ninety-nine, and came after the lost. He gave his blood for the undeserving. Objection 3. 'The poor may abuse it'. Answer: Christ might have said the same; yea, with far greater truth. Christ knew that thousands would trample his blood under their feet; that many would despise it; that many would make it an excuse for sinning more; yet he gave his own blood. Oh my dear Christians! If you would be like Christ, give much, give often, give freely, to the vile and poor, the thankless and the undeserving. Christ is glorious and happy, and so will you be. It is not your money I want, but your happiness. Remember his own word, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'" – R.M. M'Cheyne

4. Justice. There are places where believers are told to "do justice" or live "justly" (Mic. 6:8). Evangelicals tend to translate that word "live righteously" and generalize it to mean general Christian obedience to God's word. That isn't accurate, especially not when understanding the term in the Old Testament.

a) What is "doing justice"? At the most basic level, doing justice means giving people their due as beings in the image of God. On the one hand that means restraining and punishing wrongdoers. On the other hand it means giving people what we owe them as beings in the image of God. Nicholas Wolterstorff says that, as a creature in the image of God, each human being comes into your presence with "claim-rights." That is, they have the right to not be killed or kidnapped or raped. Genesis 9 says murderers must be punished
because human beings are made in the image of God. Of course there is plenty of room for disagreement on the specifics of what we owe a human being, just by virtue of their being human, but that's the basic principle. Doing justice, then, includes everything from law enforcement to being generous to the poor. See the long list of things in Job 29 and 31 which are called "doing justice"—it includes both law enforcement as well the ending of exploitive business practices and generous sharing of your resources with the poor. According to the Old Testament, God’s justice means to share food, shelter, and other basic resources with those who have fewer of them (Is 58:6-10). Injustice happens when people are barred from fair wages and therefore from the same goods and opportunities afforded others (cf. Lev. 19:13, Jer. 22:13).

There is another way to think of justice. Old Testament scholar Bruce Waltke can define justice in this startling way, "The tzadiq [just] are [those who are] willing to disadvantage themselves to advantage the community; the wicked are [those who are] willing to disadvantage the community to advantage themselves." Most people think of "wickedness" as disobeying the Ten Commandments by lying or committing adultery. And those things are, of course, wicked! But lying and adultery are only the most visible tip of the iceberg of wickedness. Just below the surface, less visible but no less wicked, is not feeding the poor when you have the power to do so, or taking so much income out of the business you own that your employees are paid poorly, or shoveling snow from your own driveway without even thinking to do the same for your elderly neighbors. In all these ways you disadvantage others by advantaging yourself. Now we see "doing justice" can be something that we do everyday. It is not just done in courts or legislatures. Living justly means the constant recognition of the claims of community upon us, it means disadvantaging ourselves in order to advantage others. This works itself out in every single area of life, including family and sexual relationships, job and vocation, use of wealth and possessions, citizenship, how we pursue our leisure, how we seek and use corporate profits, how we communicate and present ourselves, how we form and conduct friendships. And this means going well beyond what is legally required of us. A CEO who "wears justice as a robe" as Job says cannot be thinking only of his shareholders' profit, but also the good of his employees and the community in which the business operates. All kinds of things that a bank and its managers can do legally are, according to the Bible, unjust. According to the Old Testament, God's justice means to share food, shelter, and other basic resources with those who have fewer of them (Is. 58:6-10).

b) Why is meeting basic human needs called not just mercy but justice?

We do not all start out with equal privileges and assets. For example, inner city children, through no fault of their own, may grow up with vastly inferior schooling and with an overall environment extremely detrimental to learning. Conservatives may argue that this is the parents' fault or the "culture's" fault while liberals see it as a failure of government and/or the fruit of systemic racism. But no one argues that it is the children's fault! Of course it is possible for youth born into poverty to break out of it—but it takes many times more fortitude, independence, creativity, and courage to simply go to college and get a job than it does for any child born into a middle class world. In short, some children grow up with about a 200-times better opportunity for academic and economic success than others do. (You can’t ask an illiterate 8 year old—soon to be an illiterate 17 year-old—to "pull himself up by his bootstraps"!) Why does this situation exist? It is part of the deep injustice of our world. The problem is simply an unjust distribution of opportunity and resources.

c) Why should we do justice?

There are two reasons: 1) The first we have mentioned, it is the doctrine of creation—namely that God made every human being in the image of God. People are not objects, they are not commodities to be used. 2) But the second reason, even in the Old Testament, is the doctrine of redemption. God tells Israel: "The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were aliens in Egypt. I am the Lord your God" (Lev. 19:34). The Israelites had been "aliens" and oppressed slaves in Egypt. They did not have the ability to free themselves—God liberated them by his grace and
power. Now they are to treat all people with less power or fewer assets as neighbors, doing love and justice to them. So the basis for "doing justice" is salvation by grace! Christians may disagree about the particular political approach to the problems of injustice. But all Christians must be characterized by a) their passion for justice, and b) their personal commitment to ameliorate injustice through personal giving, sacrifice, and generosity.

B. Practical Issues So how do we go about this work at Redeemer?

1. The Diaconate and Hope for New York

I can't speak highly enough on behalf of the historic Reformed practice of having two offices in the church—elder (over the ministry of the Word) and deacons (over the ministry of deed). Elders are over the deacons, but allow the deacons real freedom to carry out wholistic ministry of mercy and justice especially within the congregation (Gal. 6:10; Acts 6:1ff) and in the immediate neighborhood. The primary way to help members with financial needs is through the friendships within the person’s fellowship group, but if the problems are complex or protracted, the Diaconate can step in and supplement and support the group. Evangelistic ministries in a neighborhood may also need diaconal support to be sure that we meet all the pastoral needs of the individuals who are inquiring and seeking.

Our diaconal work within the congregation is carried out by our deacons and deaconesses, but the work of mercy and justice out in the rest of the city is carried out by Hope for New York, a separate 501(c)3. Why do we do it that way?

2. Principle – What is the work of the church; of Christians? We have said that justice and mercy is one of the four ministry fronts of Redeemer— it exists in an interdependent, symbiotic relationships with the other "fronts." All four of them represent duties that belong to every believer—to connect to God, to others, to the city, and to the culture. Nevertheless, there is an important distinction between what the church as church—as an institution—does, and what individual Christians do, with regard to the work of mercy and justice.

The church should help believers shape every area of their lives with the gospel. But that doesn’t mean that the church as an institution is itself to do everything it equips its members to do. For example, while the church should disciple its members who are filmmakers so that their cinematic art will be profoundly influenced by the gospel, that does not mean that the church should establish a company that produces feature films. No institution or organization can do all things well—that goes also for the Christian church.

At this point the concept of Abraham Kuyper's "sphere sovereignty" can be of some help. Kuyper was both a Christian minister and the prime minister of the Netherlands at the turn of the twentieth century. As both a theologian and a politician, he was able to reflect on the respective roles of church, state, and voluntary associations. Kuyper concluded that the institutional church’s mission is to evangelize and nurture believers in Christian community. As it does this work, it produces people who engage in art, science, education, journalism, filmmaking, business, in distinctive ways as believers in Christ. The church, in this view, produces individuals who change society, but the local congregation should not itself engage in these enterprises. Kuyper distinguished between the institutional church—the congregation meeting under its leaders—and the "organic" church, which consists of all Christians, functioning in the world as individuals and through various agencies and voluntary organizations.

He concluded, that while the church must disciple and support its members to do justice and mercy, as an institution it should: a) concentrate its efforts to relieve all the needs of individuals within the church and b) show compassion for neighbors by doing some work in the immediate neighborhood, but c) for the more ambitious work of social reform and the addressing of social structure, believers should work through associations and organizations rather than through the local church. I believe Kuyper is generally right.

This is also a very practical issue. Many of urban churches form community development corporations,
distinct from their congregations, to operate programs in the community. This frees the pastors and leaders of the local church to build up the church through evangelism and discipleship, and it enables laypeople who are skilled in other fields to provide leadership over the various ministries that major in doing justice. Churches that, against Kuyper’s advice, try to take on all the levels of doing justice often find that the work of community renewal and social justice overwheels the work of preaching, teaching, and nurturing the congregation.

3. Relief, Development, and Reform Another helpful distinction is the following: We should recognize different “levels” of ministry to the poor.

First, there is relief, direct aid to meet physical/material/social needs. Common relief ministries are temporary shelter for the homeless, food and clothing services for people in dire need, medical services, crisis counseling, and so on. A more active form of relief is “advocacy,” in which people in need are given active assistance to get legal aid, help them find housing, and find other kinds of aid. Relief programs alone can create patterns of dependency.

Second, there is development, what is needed is to bring a person or community to self-sufficiency. In the OT, when a slave’s debt was erased and he was released, God directed that his former master send him out with grain, tools, and resources for a new, self-sufficient economic life (Deut. 15:13-14). "Development" for an individual includes education, job creation and training. But development for a neighborhood or community means re-investing social and financial capital into a social system—housing development and home ownership, other capital investments, and so on. Finally, there is reform. Social reform moves beyond relief of immediate needs and dependency and seeks to change social conditions and structures which aggravate or cause that dependency. Job tells us that he not only clothed the naked, but he “broke the fangs of the wicked and made them drop their victims” (Job 29:17). The prophets denounced unfair wages (Jer. 22:13), corrupt business practices (Amos 8:2,6), legal systems weighted in favor of the rich and influential (Deut. 24:17; Lev.19:15), a system of lending capital that gouges the person of modest means (Lev. 19:35-37; 25:37; Ex. 22:25-27). Daniel calls a pagan government to account for its lack of mercy to the poor (Dan. 4:27). This means that Christians should also work for a particular community to get better police protection, more just and fair banking practices, zoning practices, better laws.

Should the church be doing reform, or even development? For theological and practical reasons, the answer is, in general, that the institutional church should concentrate on the first and part of the second level—on relief and some individual development. When it comes to the second and third level, on community development, social reform, and the addressing of social structures, believers should work through Christians banding together to do justice and mercy—in varied associations and organizations—rather than directly through the local church. It is not easy to dogmatically draw lines here. Different social and cultural conditions can affect how directly the church is involved in addressing issues of justice. As we look back on it now, we applaud white-Anglo churches that preached against and worked against the evils of African slavery in America. So too the African-American church, under the extreme conditions of slavery and near-slavery, took on all three levels of ministry to the poor, and this continues to this day. In the end, though, while the institutional church should do relief inside and around its community, the "organic" church should be doing development and social reform.

Why? Many would argue that the second and third levels are too expensive and would take away financial resources from the ministry of the Word. Others say they are too political and would require that the congregation be too allied with particular civil magistrates and political parties in ways that would compromise the church in various ways.

Others say that the second and third levels are too complex and it is not within the skill-set or mandate of the elders of the church to manage them. Their job is the ministry of the Word of God and prayer (Acts 6:1-7). All of these arguments have some merit but would need to be nuanced and worked out in order to do justice to my thesis. I cannot here give that process the time and space it would require. I would only observe that most of the churches in the U.S. who are deeply involved in caring for the poor
have found it wisest to spin off non-profit corporations to do community development and reform of social structures, rather than seek to do them directly through the local congregation, under the elders.