



SPEAKING OF JUSTICE

10 Terms Christian Gender Justice Advocates Should Know

by Rachel Asproth

Micah 6:8 contains three seemingly simple commands: do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God. Justice-doing is meant to be a central tenet of lived faith. And yet, humans have struggled to deal justly with each other since the fall.

The church's ability to do justice is inhibited by ignorance of and misunderstanding of *what* justice actually is and *how* it is to be done by the church. The *what* of justice-doing refers to Christians' concept of justice, how we understand oppression, injustice, advocacy, privilege, and power. The *how* of justice-doing refers to the ways Christians act on our justice paradigm

in unjust situations or contexts. Without these two pillars, the church's concept of justice lacks cultural awareness and appropriate self-reflection.

Often, those outside of the social justice activist community can feel overwhelmed by the concepts and terminology of justice work. Many Christians want to understand these terms and concepts so they can do justice well in their communities and in the world.

In that vein, here is a short introduction to some key justice terms and concepts to help Christians think critically about *what* justice is and *how* it ought to look in action.

1. PRIVILEGE

Privilege refers to a set of political, economic, and social advantages or rights a person is afforded based on membership to a specific social group. These advantages are unearned.

There are many different kinds of privilege. For example, a white person in the US enjoys racial privilege over people of color. A woman in almost every country in the world is disadvantaged by a global system of male privilege. A person with disability is "other"-ized by cultures that benefit the able. It is critical to understand that a person who is disadvantaged in one

category may enjoy privilege in one or more other ways.

For example, an upper class, white woman in the US enjoys two kinds of privilege (economic and racial) while also suffering as a result of gender oppression. Privilege doesn't exist in a vacuum. Understanding this can help Christian gender equality advocates be aware of their own privilege and sensitive to the many vehicles of marginalization.

2. POWER

Privilege and power are interconnected concepts, but they are not the same. Privilege is the *result* of systemic injustice, but power is *what is needed* to oppress others. Power is simply the ability to get what you want. A privileged group has the social power to execute systemic injustice.

The unequal distribution of power is the root of oppression. A person may hold prejudice against another person or group, but without power, they lack the ability to influence social outcomes. Power is a relational concept, often existing in contrast to those with less power in society. For example, if women hold little social power, men, by contrast, hold a disproportionately large amount.

Redistribution of power is a key task for social justice advocates, since power has historically been hoarded, not shared. Social justice advocates often treat power as a resource, recognizing that privileged groups must forfeit unearned, unequal social power to oppressed people who have had very little historical power.

The redistribution of power can be difficult for the privileged. For example, some men feel that laws and initiatives meant to curb discrimination against women actually penalize men. In reality, they are experiencing a *loss of privilege* in the attempt to redistribute social power to women.

3. SYSTEMIC INJUSTICE

Systemic injustice is organized and non-random oppression, discrimination against, and exploitation of a people group. It is built into an institution or society's laws, practices, and values. It relies on the participation of many individuals and institutions, both knowingly and unknowingly, in the ongoing oppression of a people group.

For example, patriarchy is a social system that awards men primary social, economic, and political power. Patriarchy is built into the laws, practices, and values of the world, illustrated by the global political dominance of men and their overwhelming control over valuable resources and property. Patriarchy relies on the actions of many individuals and institutions to oppress women and elevate men.

4. -ISM

In justice circles, the suffix *-ism* refers to systemic social, economic, and political injustice and psychological prejudice toward a people group. An *-ism* is more than just an individual's prejudice against another people group. It is a system of prejudice that uses power to

elevate the privileged and obstruct the marginalized. For the sake of time and space, we'll touch on four *-isms*: racism, sexism, classism, and ethnocentrism.

Racism is a system of prejudicial thoughts and actions toward a people group based on race and/or ethnicity. Sexism refers to a system of psychological, social, political, and economic prejudice based on sex. Classism is a system of prejudice based on economic differences, generally subordinating the lower classes to the upper class. Ethnocentrism is a system that elevates one culture above another, judging other groups as inferior based on the standards and values of one's own culture.

It's important to remember that any *-ism* requires a key ingredient: power. Specifically, the power to enact systemic injustice. Any group can harbor hatred or prejudice toward another, but if a group lacks power over another, it's just that—prejudice, not racism, sexism, or any other *-ism*. Thus, accusations of reverse racism or reverse sexism carry no weight.

It is also critical to understand that an *-ism* can be unconscious or unintentional. A psychological state of prejudice may exist without a person's knowledge. Likewise, a person can unknowingly benefit from a system of injustice, receiving unearned privileges and access to resources. For example, a man may not recognize that he benefits from a global system of sexism, but he is still complicit in the oppression of women.

Ignorance, willful or otherwise, of how we may benefit from systemic injustice is just as dangerous as explicit participation in an oppressive system. In other words, being unaware of systemic injustice does not make us any less complicit in the oppression of others.

Gender equality advocates should be deeply aware of how power and prejudice combine to systematically oppress women and other marginalized groups.

5. INTERSECTIONALITY

Intersectionality is the theory that oppressive systems are interconnected and thus, cannot be examined or dismantled

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separately. Practically, this means that a person or group can experience oppression or marginalization in many ways simultaneously.

For a black, Asian, Latina, or Native American woman in the US, white privilege and male privilege are not only equal problems, they are interconnected problems. As advocates for gender equality, we must understand that justice that isn't intersectional is incomplete and potentially destructive. It excludes and silences women who experience interconnected, layered oppression.

6. FEMINISM/CHRISTIAN FEMINISM

Feminism is the advocacy of women's social, political, and economic equality to men. Christian feminism adds another category to the list: spiritual equality. Christian feminism advocates for gender equality in the home, church, and world.

While secular feminism has many strains, some compatible with the gospel and some not, the core idea is simply that men and women should have the same value, rights, and opportunities. Though some Christians still struggle to cast aside misconceptions of feminism, many Christians view the gospel and feminism as compatible.

7. WOMANISM

Womanism, or black feminism, was born out of a criticism of feminism as white-centric. Many black women felt that feminism did not welcome or reflect the perspectives and needs of black women.

Black women experience racism and sexism simultaneously. Womanism seeks to articulate the unique experience of dual oppression in the lives of women of color. Womanism also offers a critical challenge to those who advocate for gender equality or identify as feminists without considering the impact of racial injustice on women of color.

In addition to womanism, gender justice advocates should be familiar with the many related women's movements and perspectives such as: Chicana (Xicanisma) feminism, Africana womanism, Latina feminism, Mujerista theology, Asian American feminism, Islamic feminism, and indigenous feminism.

8. COLORBLINDNESS

This is a critical concept to understand, especially for Christians. Because we as Christians believe that all humans share the same worth before God, it is easy to dismiss difference of any kind, including skin color. If you live in the US, you have probably heard a white Christian say, "I don't see skin color; I just see people." Well-meaning as it may be, this approach is actually flawed for several reasons.

Colorblindness ignores the complex identities of others. It blinds the privileged to the unique issues and injustices oppressed people face, and it prevents us from celebrating our differences. The reality is that a man's experience is not just like a woman's experience. Likewise, a person in a majority racial group does not share the experience of a person in a minority, marginalized racial group.

Colorblindness is a refusal to acknowledge both one's own privilege and the injustice being done to a marginalized person or group. An advocate for gender equality should be color-aware—able to recognize how racial bias impacts how they think about gender equality.

9. ALLY

An ally is a member of an advantaged group who chooses to advocate for the oppressed. An ally recognizes their privilege, seeks to eliminate oppression, and works *alongside* the marginalized. This last piece is particularly critical, because it is easy for allies to develop a "savior complex," in which they view themselves as rescuers of the oppressed. This is just another expression of privilege.

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In reality, a true ally checks their privilege regularly and respects the agency and voice of oppressed groups and persons. An ally should also learn to leverage their privilege, meaning that they use their unearned advantage to give power to an oppressed person. An ally earns that title. Christians advocating for gender equality or any other justice issue must constantly reevaluate whether their behavior and advocacy actually benefit the oppressed.

10. AGENCY

Agency refers to a person's capacity to act independently, make choices, and impose those choices. Agency is a critical concept for gender equality advocates

to understand, because women have typically been seen as a group in need of male rescue. Because of this stereotype, a woman who is abused or oppressed is often seen primarily as a victim. This is problematic, because it minimizes the humanity and ability of women; women who have been victimized still retain agency.

An oppressed person can still exercise agency when he or she makes choices that oppose an unjust social structure. Particularly as gender equality advocates, Christians must respect the agency of women so that efforts to help women do not paint them as victims only, undermining their authority and autonomy.

God calls Christians to move on behalf of the oppressed. But he also grants us wisdom, the ability to self-reflect, and access to knowledge that can help us do lasting and meaningful justice in his name. As Christians, we must pair our desire to do justice with a critical understanding of *what* justice entails and *how* it is best executed. May we be a church built on more than just good intentions.



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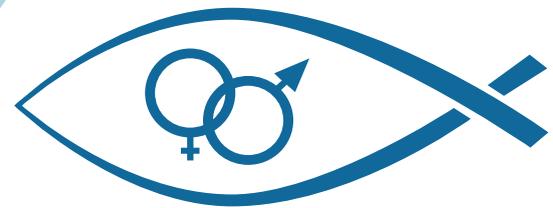
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