



## Do Justice

*"Do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with your God." Micah 6:8*

### A Newsletter on Social Justice Issues

Welcome to the November edition of Do Justice as we continue to discuss issues of social justice from a Christian perspective. Much of this edition was written in mid-October.

#### Community responsibility versus individual freedom

Over recent weeks the tension between our responsibilities to the community as followers of Jesus and our 'right' to freedom have come very much to the fore. Two things seem to have brought this dichotomy to the surface – the lengthy lockdown due to the Delta variant, particularly in Auckland, and the need for the population to be vaccinated against COVID-19. The advocates of the 'right to freedom' include two leaders of churches in Auckland, Brian Tamaki of Destiny Church and Peter Mortlock of City Impact Church.

Destiny Church states that one of its core beliefs is, *"We believe in the divine inspiration and authority of the Bible. It is the Word of God."*<sup>1</sup> City Impact Church puts it slightly differently: *"We believe that the Bible is God's Word to all people. It was written by human authors who were inspired by the Holy Spirit. The Bible is the truth. It is eternal and has supernatural power to change lives. It is completely relevant to our daily lives."*<sup>2</sup>

Both leaders have made it very clear that they oppose the lockdown in Auckland, and Tamaki was the chief organiser of a protest by one to two thousand people in the Auckland Domain on 2 October 2021. According to these church leaders, the measures the Government has taken under the COVID-19 Public Health Response Act 2020 take away their 'right to freedom'. Is this 'right to freedom' biblically based? What does the Bible actually say about a 'right to freedom', and how can it be applied to our current situation where the health and welfare of the community are under threat?

First the Bible. There are between 20 and 25 mentions of the word 'freedom' in the Bible, depending on the translation you look at. In the Old Testament, freedom is first mentioned in Exodus 21 and is all about freedom in a marriage situation. Leviticus 25:10 is about the year of jubilee. *"It is a time of freedom and of celebration when everyone will receive back their original property, and slaves will return home to their families"*(CEV). Isaiah 61 is probably the most familiar passage on freedom: *"... announce freedom for prisoners and captives"*, a passage that Jesus quotes at the beginning of his

ministry (Luke 4:18). The Epistles have a number of references to freedom, in particular Galatians 5:13 *"My friends, you were chosen to be free. So don't use your freedom as an excuse to do anything you want. Use it as an opportunity to serve each other with love."* And 1 Peter 2:16 *"You are free, but still you are God's servants, and you must not use your freedom as an excuse for doing wrong."*

These last two passages clearly link, and limit, freedom to our responsibilities as members of a community. If our actions put other members of our community in danger, then this is clearly against biblical teaching. So, the question is: Was the protest on 2 October 2021 and are the claims to a 'right to freedom' biblical? Only time will tell if they are legal.

Moreover, biblical teaching seems to be very much in line with secular practice and legal requirements as far as lockdowns and vaccination are concerned. Both are for the benefit of the whole community.

Some of the arguments about vaccination are interesting. There are no references to vaccination in the Bible; vaccination is a process that has only been developed in the last 200 or so years. The argument that 'I do not know what is in the vaccine' is easily rebutted. Another argument is that the vaccines were developed very rapidly, and vaccines usually take many years to develop and test. However, the flu vaccine changes annually to take care of the virus mutating.

There are a small number of people in our community whose health would be put at risk if they were to receive the vaccine. This is something that must be considered as far as public policy is concerned when it comes to the status of vaccinated and non-vaccinated people in our society.

And this takes us to perhaps the most difficult question as far as COVID-19, and our response, is concerned. Should the Government and/or organisations mandate vaccination? Mandating, or requiring full vaccination before a person can enter a premises or use a service has implications as far as the Human Rights Act 1993 is concerned. The Act lists various grounds for discrimination including religious belief, ethical belief, and political opinion. The Act makes it unlawful to discriminate in providing access to various areas of public life including:

<sup>1</sup> [Destiny Church | About Us](#)

<sup>2</sup> [What We Believe - City Impact Church](#)

- employment
- education
- access to public places
- provision of goods and services
- housing and accommodation.<sup>3</sup>

The Health and Safety Act 2015 requires that “workers and others are given the highest level of protection from workplace health and safety risks, so far as is reasonably practicable. This includes risks to both physical and mental health.”<sup>4</sup> This would appear to require employers to ensure that all staff, and those whom staff encounter as part of their employment, are vaccinated against COVID-19, as lack of such vaccination could be a health risk. This requirement has already been used by the Government in requiring all border workers to be vaccinated as a condition of working on the border. And the Government is now requiring all health workers and teachers and others in close contact with children to be vaccinated.

Both the Human Rights Act and the Health and Safety Act are intended to protect the rights of all in Aotearoa New Zealand to freedom of movement, opinion, and identifiable danger. But in the case of COVID-19, we appear to have at least a perceived conflict in implementing both Acts. The Government appears to be struggling with this conflict between Health and Human Rights. As Christians, we must also have think carefully about the conflict; in the present circumstances the command of Jesus to love our neighbour should cause us to put health first. Organising large protests does not appear to put the health of our community first.

#### **Is the climate crisis becoming a catastrophe?**

By the time you read this, the COP26 meeting in Glasgow will be under way or finished. This meeting of world leaders will be the most important meeting of the year if not the decade. At the Paris meeting in 2015, world leaders made commitments to take action to reduce greenhouse gases so that world average temperature rise would be restricted to well below 2.0°C, and as near to 1.5°C as possible, by 2050. The Glasgow meeting is the first major international follow-up to assess how well world leaders are fulfilling those commitments and if enough has been done.

Last month we discussed the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change’s (IPCC) Sixth Assessment Report that had just been released. If this report is anything to go by, world leaders will be getting straight Fs. We have gone backwards not forwards. In New Zealand, despite some useful legislative advances including the setting up of the Climate Change Commission, the hard decisions, particularly around agriculture, have not been taken. Even the Government has delayed until May 2022 its response to the Climate Change Commission’s report which the law requires by the end of this year. What are the implications of delays in getting greenhouse emissions under control? We have already seen some, with the dramatic increase in droughts, floods, storms, forest fires, etc. over the last few years. The continuing melting of glaciers and polar ice is not just having an impact on sea levels but is also contributing to changing weather

patterns. Perhaps even more concerning is the melting of permafrost in Arctic regions and the emissions of large amounts of methane into the atmosphere.

Much has been said about the two major absorbers of CO<sub>2</sub> in particular – oceans and forests. This escape route is not without problems. The oceans are slowly heating up and this is having an impact on coral reefs and fish. Fish stocks are under threat around the world, which means fish as a food must be under threat. Despite much campaigning to stop the conversion of forests into farmland, vast areas of rainforest continue to be cleared in the name of short-term profitability rather than long-term sustainability. Tropical rain forests are being cleared at alarming rates, particularly in Brazil and Indonesia. At least the New Zealand Government has encouraged the conversion of ‘marginal’ farmland into forest, at the same time as encouraging the planting of indigenous trees rather than pine. Even this small action produced some negative feedback from some farmers!

But change is going to be required of all of us. The Government has a responsibility to take the lead and make the major decisions necessary to limit global temperature rise, but each one of us is going to have to accept changes in our lifestyle. These changes will be revolutionary. Can we continue to tolerate gross inequality in our society both in our country and worldwide? Can we continue to have people living in cars in New Zealand? Can we continue to have people without clean water to drink or going hungry in many parts of the world? Can we continue to have individuals who are amassing wealth day by day sufficient to provide food for millions of hungry people? Can we continue to have billionaires sending themselves and friends into space for the fun of it? Can we continue to eat large quantities of meat when there are more sustainable alternatives? Can we continue to drive vehicles that produce greenhouse gas emissions when we could walk or get public transport or even drive a car using electricity? And so on ...

When COVID-19 struck in early 2020, we raised in our April 2020 edition the hope that we should return to a new normal, one not focused exclusively on GDP but on sustainability. Now, 18 months later and in the middle of an even longer shutdown, it seems many want to return to the old normal. Many people want pubs to open and to go inside to get takeaways rather than stand at the door. If we do not change, then the climate crisis will become a catastrophe. This planet will not be able to support a population of 10 billion at the end of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and it may not even be able to support human life at all. Is this what we want to leave our children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren? It is good to know that at least one journalist from New Zealand, Rod Oram, will be covering COP26 in person for Newsroom.

Let us all pray that all the leaders of this planet will agree that this must not happen and do everything possible to stop it. One relevant prayer can be found at:

<https://cafod.org.uk/Pray/Prayer-resources/COP26-prayer>

<sup>3</sup> [The Human Rights Act | New Zealand Ministry of Justice](#)

<sup>4</sup> [Health and safety at work » Employment New Zealand](#)