

DRAFT

Covenant Resource Paper

The Evangelical Covenant Church and The Ministry of Compassion, Mercy, and Justice

And what does the Lord require of you?
To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.
Micah 6:8

Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of
these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.
Matthew 25:40b

Introduction

Ministries of compassion, mercy, and justice in the Evangelical Covenant Church (ECC) have a long and significant history. During the 1990s and on into the new millennium, interest in these ministries grew. This growth reflected a deepening conviction that to be faithful to the Bible, the Covenant Church must work to live out the Great Commandment in all its ramifications. In Mark 12, a scribe asks Jesus which commandment is the most important. He answers, “The most important one ... is this: ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these” (vv. 29-31). This text provides the foundation for ministries of compassion, mercy, and justice. It intimately links love of God with love for neighbor. This perspective, reflecting the historic foundations and character of the Covenant Church, is inscribed succinctly in stone at the base of the first building erected at North Park University: “For God and Humanity.”

At the beginning of his ministry Jesus read these words from Isaiah 61:1-2: “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:18-19). Linking God’s love with love for neighbor, during the second Covenant Annual Meeting in 1886, Henry Palmblad proposed establishment of the Home of Mercy on the North Side of Chicago. An approving vote led to the swift development of a three-story building that served the sick on one floor, orphaned children on another, and the elderly on the other. Through ministries of compassion, mercy, and justice, we follow the example of Jesus in announcing the good news of the kingdom of God in word and deed.

The purpose of this paper is to articulate a communal discernment of the Covenant Church. It is intended to give guidance, definition, and substance to our desire to be a biblical people as we continue to develop ministries of compassion, mercy, and justice that are, we believe, vitally important to Jesus and consequently to us as well.

Our Working Definitions of Compassion, Mercy, and Justice

What is compassion? What is mercy? What is justice? All three words embody critical concerns emanating from the heart of God, revealing to humanity essential characteristics of God’s nature. God’s heart is clearly expressed in the words of Jesus in Matthew 25:35-36: “For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me

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in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.” Jesus’ words give comprehensive expression to our call to be engaged in ministries of compassion, ministries of mercy, *and* ministries of justice. Likewise, Micah 6:8 succinctly states what God requires of us: to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God. Compassion is found in verse 19 of the next chapter of Micah, which speaks directly of the compassion of God, marveling at it and linking it to God’s forgiveness: “You will again have compassion on us; you will tread our sins underfoot ...” (now addressing God directly), “... and hurl all our inequities into the depths of the sea.”

As we explore the Bible, we see that compassion, mercy, and justice are intimately connected. They are words whose meanings are woven together, belong together, and define each other. They should be viewed as a unified whole.

With these texts in mind, we believe:

- **Compassion is God’s love in action** – **compassion** embodies the heart of God, carrying God’s love into action for all people, especially for those who are poor, oppressed, and marginalized. Actions on behalf of others flow from a grateful and merciful heart.
- **Mercy is God’s grace applied** – **mercy** is the deep, gut-wrenching and mind-changing recognition of God’s grace to us while we were yet sinners and the extension of compassion, forgiveness and care to others; it is seeing ourselves in the plight of others, which leads us to a compassionate and just response.
- **Justice is God’s work of making things right** – **justice** is the work of God confronting and overcoming evil and sin both individually and systemically in our world. The people of God are required to join God in this work, restoring God’s righteous purpose and shalom for creation and the human family. For the follower of Christ, injustice is not an abstraction but a reality that we must identify, name, and intentionally address.

With these basic definitions, we will explore a range of biblical texts that will help us more fully understand compassion, mercy, and justice and the central role they have as we seek to understand God, the world in which we live and work, and Christ’s Church.

The Image of God

The Bible states in Genesis 1:31 that God is pleased with creation, declaring it to be good. In that passage, human beings, male and female, are presented as both created in the image of God. This means that every person bears the full image of God in their very being. This idea from the first verses of the Bible establishes personal human identity and dignity in each and every person.

Yet, the goodness of the created world and of the fabric of human society was soon fractured by disobedience to God’s will. The murder of Abel (Genesis 3) by a sibling, Cain, is a terrible affront to God’s intention. The remainder of Genesis provides a sweeping overview and sordid detail chronicling the pervasiveness and destructiveness of sin and evil. Murder, rape, betrayal, revenge, and retribution all reveal the blunt truth. God’s creatures, human beings, diverged so far from God’s good purpose and intent that in Genesis 6:6 God declares: “I regret that I have made them.”

God does not, however, abandon a corrupted creation to its own ways. Early on God begins to reach out to save and restore, first through Noah and his wife (Genesis 6:9–10:32), then through the calling of Abram and the formation of a covenant community (Genesis 12ff). Yet even this community, we read, is beset by intrigue, infidelity, and jealousy. Remarkably, as we continue through Genesis, God persists in reaching out, saving and restoring, even while judging and declaring displeasure with the actions and

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deeds of people of the promise. In these repeated acts to save, God's nature and character are shown more richly and fully, while society sinks deeper into chaos at every level.

How then do we, as people of God, relate to this world in which the image of God in creation has been corrupted? Micah 6:8 declares what God requires: "To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." In so doing, we participate in God's work to restore goodness to creation, and in the process, honor the image of God in the people God has created.

Courage to See and Hear

We continue our exploration of the text at the burning bush where God says to Moses, "I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering" (Exodus 3:7). God continues to see and hear oppression, suffering, and misery. In fact, we believe God sees all injustice and all of its consequences, all that fails to measure up to the goodness that God intended in creation. God's response is, and has always been, to rescue, to save, and to deliver (Exodus 3:8-9) people from the pain and injustice that defines daily life.

When the conditions of human life fall short of what God intended, God first demonstrates compassion (seeing, listening, and hearing). God then acts to deliver, save and rescue, and ultimately to establish a new reality, evidenced by the plan for a new place, a new land flowing with milk and honey. Moses knows it will be hard, painful, demanding, disruptive, and full of risk to join God in bringing justice to his people. He would rather avoid the task, preferring to look away and defer to someone else. But though the way would be hard, Moses commits himself to God's call to do God's work in the world (Exodus 4:18).

Let this be said clearly and forthrightly: God does not tolerate injustice created and perpetuated by systems and actions that oppress and result in human suffering. God enlists people through the Holy Spirit, as he enlisted Moses, to work with God and not just on behalf of God, to bring about change – change in the structures in which we are often complicit that create suffering and oppression, along with change in the lives of people.

The Message of the Prophets

Turning to the prophets, we find a poetic and pointed challenge from Isaiah 58:6: "Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke?" These are actions of true worship, comparable to the spiritual discipline of fasting. The ministries of compassion, mercy, and justice are integral to the worship life of the people of God. Worship is more than the singing of songs and hymns, more than seventy-five minutes carved out of the week. A worshipful life—individual and corporate—encompasses praise, proclamation, spiritual disciplines, *and* compassion, mercy, and justice.

The prophets show us that the failure of God's people to be people of compassion, mercy, and justice has serious consequences. God warns of punishment: "They sell the innocent for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals. They trample on the heads of the poor as on the dust of the ground and deny justice to the oppressed." (Amos 2:6b–7a). We see time and again that the people of God, while called by God to ministries of compassion, mercy, and justice, have often done just the opposite, contributing to injustice, benefiting from oppression, and turning a cold shoulder to the plight of the outcast. Amos 6:4-7, for example, reflects some behaviors as rooted in self-indulgence: "You lie on beds inlaid with ivory and lounge on your couches ... but you do not grieve over the ruin of Joseph." In similar fashion, Isaiah 58:3b points out self-interest: "Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers." Such self-indulgence and self-centeredness do not like to be confronted: "There are those who hate the one who reproves in court and detest the one who tells the truth" (Amos 5:10).

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These words can pierce our hearts if we contemplate our own lives and the sometimes unseen links between our comfort and the plight of others. The fear of God's judgment is not paralyzing, but brings us to repentance, conversion, and a righteous response.

Ultimately, to do justice is to know God. "Does it make you a king to have more and more cedar? Did not your father have food and drink? He did what was right and just, so all went well with him. He defended the cause of the poor and needy, and so all went well. Is that not what it means to know me? declares the Lord" (Jeremiah 22:15-16).

Linking Personal Formation with Mission

At the beginning of his ministry, in his hometown of Nazareth, Jesus read these words from Isaiah 61:1-2: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:18-19). These words, he said, were fulfilled in him. Jesus is saying that the compassion, mercy, and justice of God are embodied in his own being and life as God incarnate. Jesus embraces this text as his personal mission statement.

Likewise, people who have received new birth in Christ are called to join in this ongoing mission of Jesus in the world (John 20:21). In Ephesians 2:10, Paul writes that we are both saved by grace and saved for good works. Ministries of compassion, mercy, and justice spring forth from the new life that we receive in Christ and result in good works that are pleasing to God. As we share good news and as we become good news for all people, we live out Christ and his kingdom in our world. In this process we open our own lives to the Holy Spirit to conform us more and more into the image of Christ, contributing to the fulfillment of the Lord's Prayer, "your Kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10). God answers that prayer through us as we grow into him, into godliness, becoming people who are compassionate, merciful, and just, and extending those graces to people around us.

In Luke 6:36, Jesus instructs us to "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful." We are not just to do merciful acts. We are to *be* merciful, imitating Christ and thereby, as Jesus says, imitating God. The formation of a merciful character will express itself in social interaction, relationships, and action.

Furthermore, in Christian communities, righteousness has often been understood as individual and private, leading to some resistance to considering the problems of societal unrighteousness and systemic injustice. A recovery of the biblical word "justice" helps move us from individual concerns toward a fuller righteousness that includes corporate and public justice as well as individual holiness.

Thy Kingdom Come

The death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ is the central event of the Christian narrative. In the resurrection of Jesus Christ, God surprises us by breaking into our world. Christ risen is the sign that God's rule and kingdom are already present. We do not enter that kingdom when we die. We enter it here and now, when and where God's will and way breaks into human life. And so we pray with Jesus: "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10).

The coming kingdom of God is seen in the book of Revelation's compelling vision of the New Jerusalem. That city represents the coming kingdom of God and the ultimate and final restoration of a new heaven and a new earth. It is the place of pure and full justice where God's intent is no longer ignored or corrupted. "He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away" (Revelation 21:4). Additionally, the New Jerusalem is a city in which God's presence is fully revealed and dominant (Revelation 21:22-22:2). Evil will not be

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present and sin will be absent as the presence of God creates life, gives purpose, and establishes righteousness for all in that newly established city.

Everything done here and now that incarnates God's compassion, mercy, and justice is neither lost nor wasted, just as the act of turning away from sin to become a follower of Jesus is neither lost nor wasted. There is glorious difference, but also continuity, between this life and the life to come in the New Jerusalem. After a beautiful argument for belief in the resurrection of the body in 1 Corinthians 15, Paul says, "Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain" (1 Corinthians 15:58). Our bodily resurrection means that God will gather up all that is good and righteous in this life and bring it into God's coming kingdom, represented by the New Jerusalem. How we live our lives matters for eternity. Ministries of compassion, mercy, and justice are not wasted, not in vain, not fleeting.

Remember Who You Are

Deuteronomy 24:17–22 asks God's people to do compassion, mercy, and justice because they remember their own experience of injustice and oppression. Out of our individual and collective memory, God calls us to ministries of compassion, mercy, and justice. The many communities that today make up the movement of the Evangelical Covenant Church carry histories of injustice and even oppression, or of being aliens in a strange place. From the displaced Scandinavians of the 19th century to 21st century refugees who come to North America; from the children and grandchildren of slaves to those once interred in American camps during World War II; from those without health care to the undocumented among us, we remember the histories and experiences of our friends and families. As we remember, we enter into the stories of other people so that their stories become our own stories, not simply an external curiosity. Such remembering is used by God's Spirit to open within us wells of mercy that flow from God's own heart.

As members of the Body of Christ, the experience of one contributes to the memory of all. So we share our experiences and enter into each other's lives, as individuals and as communities. This is represented in the Covenant Church today by Sankofa and Journey to Mosaic, in which hundreds of Covenant people have participated. These multi-day immersion experiences introduce participants both to the normally hidden and often painful histories of different communities of people, and also to their present realities. Participants give testimony to personal transformation on many levels, contributing to a deeper understanding of both the need of and the mandate for ministries of compassion, mercy, and justice.

Such experiences, guided by the Holy Spirit, can benefit all Covenant people. Just as many people desire to walk where Jesus walked from Bethlehem to Jerusalem, may God foster in us the courage to walk the paths of pain where our brothers and sisters have walked. To enter into the stories of others is to enter into a Holy Land of a different sort, but a land where the footprints of Jesus will be seen as clearly as in the desert sands of Palestine.

What Ministries of Compassion, Mercy, and Justice Are Not

We seek definitions or understandings of compassion, mercy, and justice that are consistent with the Bible, resisting secular definitions that may be misleading. So we say compassion, mercy, and justice ministry is not done from a position of superiority or privilege, nor is it done in a way that is condescending, paternalistic or judgmental. A biblical rendering of compassion, mercy, and justice ministry is not content with simply pointing out what is wrong; nor is it mere sympathy from a privileged perspective. Compassion, mercy, and justice ministry is not a matter of retribution; nor does it mean that those who run afoul of the laws of humanity or of God should escape judgment. And although ministries of compassion, mercy, and justice encompass social and political realities, we resist the

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temptation of the evil one to become captive to political ideologies that easily displace the rightful place and role of the Bible as the Word of God and the only perfect rule for faith, doctrine, and conduct.

Covenant Historical Foundations

Ministries of compassion, mercy, and justice in the Covenant have a powerful history, punctuated occasionally by failure and embarrassment. Our spiritual and theological roots are in German Pietism, which developed distinctive ministry to people on the fringes of society. Hermann Francke, an early Pietist leader, took into his home, cared for, and then educated the street children of his city. Henry Palmblad's Home of Mercy over time gave birth to significant institutional ministries such as Swedish Covenant Hospital and Covenant Retirement Communities, along with smaller but life-changing institutions such as the Children's Home of Cromwell and Princeton Children's Home. When the Covenant first sent missionaries to Alaska and China, they shared the good news of Christ in word and deed, establishing schools, medical clinics, and other ministries of compassion, mercy, and justice.

In the 1940s, '50s, and '60s, Covenant people wrestled with many of the challenges facing society in those decades. We acknowledge that many Christians watched from the sidelines during those racially turbulent times, including many in Covenant churches. We also acknowledge that while there was complacency in our churches, there was also complicity in the racial divide that gripped the United States. Covenant people stood by passively during the dissonant years of Jim Crow, few stood up to support the civil rights movement, and Covenant churches and Covenant people actively participated in white flight. At the same time, we recognize the fact that a significant number of lay and clergy men and women, moved by the message and call of the Gospel, worked to break down the walls and barriers confronting people of color in this church and in society. They labored and prayed to establish educational opportunity for Hispanic and Latino pastoral leaders, they developed ministries to people in prison, and poured funds into Covenant World Relief and the Paul Carlson medical program. Churches discovered the avenue of cross-cultural service through mission and service trips both domestic and around the world. During this time the seeds were sown for ministries to developmentally disabled people, and the church continued to articulate through Annual Meeting resolutions prophetic perspectives and biblical responses to sin in the world. Though not employing the language of compassion, mercy, and justice, which emerged in the 1990s, the ministries and actions of these decades reveal the unmistakable mark of people who have read, discussed, and listened to the words of Micah 6:8, Matthew 25, Luke 4, and Revelation 21 and 22 while seeking to transformationally engage culture and the powers of this world.

African, African American, Asian and Asian American, Alaskan Native and Latino congregations of the Covenant have been instrumental in leading the Covenant to become a community of compassion, mercy, and justice, beginning with insistence of a meaningful place within the Covenant Church. Communities of color within the Evangelical Covenant Church have prompted and contributed to a redefinition of the way in which the Covenant Church understands the kingdom of God. Specifically, the Covenant has generally come to understand that because God has created a world of diverse people, we work to become a church that reflects God's diverse creation. These communities have also helped Covenant people understand how to live together as Christ's body. We have come to understand that not only do we need to value and pursue racial reconciliation, but we also need to value racial righteousness because it conveys the need for justice that gives integrity to relationships. The Covenant in North America also has been challenged by examples of compassion, mercy, and justice ministries in Covenant partner churches on other continents, fostered by first-hand experiences by an increasingly mobile and well-traveled society.

Like many American churches, we struggled through debates in the early 20th century, which tended to divide evangelism and other ministries. From our foundations we have sought, however imperfectly, to

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faithfully follow the example of Jesus through proclaiming the good news of the kingdom in both word and deed. We affirm the comprehensive gospel of Jesus Christ that fully and gladly embraces a single, seamless ministry. The Covenant today is a church that endeavors to see more disciples, among more populations, in a more caring and just world.

In Christ we dare to say we are people who are evangelistic, compassionate, merciful, and just. Yet time and again we have failed to act out of compassion, to demonstrate mercy, to advocate for justice, and to share the good news. We confess and repent, desiring to grow more and more into the kind of people God has made us in Christ.

Characteristics of Biblical Ministry

How do we grow in biblical compassion, mercy, and justice? In one of our defining documents, “Covenant Affirmations,” the Covenant articulates our core values and principles, which give definition to our identity and guide the directions in which we seek to grow in Christ. Similarly, we can be aided in the pursuit of compassion, mercy, and justice by affirming a set of characteristics that display the kind of people we seek to be in these ministries. In that spirit, we offer the following characteristics to direct our formation as a movement guided by the Holy Spirit, which reflects and deliberately imitates our Lord’s character as a person of compassion, mercy, and justice.

We do ministries of compassion, mercy, and justice:

Biblically, meaning that the Bible is our primary source for inspiration and guidance in the discernment of ministry opportunities, the development of strategies and plans through which we respond, and the articulation of the outcomes that we seek to accomplish.

Prophetically, as guided and empowered by Scripture and the Holy Spirit we seek to honestly and courageously call out injustice. We speak truth to power and we call God’s people to righteous action.

Humbly and prayerfully, because we recognize our own sin. Humility helps ensure that prophetic words do not degenerate into arrogant pronouncements. Our belief in “level ground at the cross” helps keep us from acting and thinking that we are in any way superior to those we serve or to those with whom we disagree. Our ongoing prayer acknowledges our dependence on God and our desire to align our living with God’s expectation.

Formationally, because engagement in compassion, mercy, and justice ministry not only results in changed lives and social structures, but such engagement is itself a formational experience for the people who give themselves in service. We engage in these ministries in obedience to Jesus Christ and we become more faithful, Christ-like disciples through our personal engagement and investment.

Hopefully, because without hope, ministry cannot be sustained in the face of daunting adversity, entrenched opposition, evil, or simple apathy. Our hope demonstrates our belief in the resurrection, God’s great act of hope in the face of death. Through acts of compassion, mercy, and justice, God works to create and instill hope.

Holistically, because word and deed, proclamation and demonstration, evangelism and social concern go hand in hand. The whole gospel demands a holistic approach to mission.

Transformationally, in that we do not settle for mere pronouncements or statements. We are not interested in a library of church statements upon which we can rest, but seek instead to

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effect real change through ministries of compassion, mercy, and justice that result in changed individuals, churches, communities, and systems of the world.

Collaboratively, by creating and working in partnerships whenever possible. We believe there is strength and wisdom in shared ministry that increases effectiveness and reach. From large institutions with denominationally based governance structures to local food distribution programs, we have a history of doing more over a sustained length of time when there is genuine partnership. Collaboration also extends to communities we serve, offering to them dignity as God's creatures.

Generously, recognizing that the work of compassion, mercy, and justice requires wise stewardship of the resources God has provided.

Thankfully, finding again and again that in forgiveness and new life at the table of our Lord, we are merciful and just toward others out of gratitude to God for the inexpressible compassion, mercy, and justice shown to us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus our Lord.

Local Covenant Church Mission

Where does a local church begin? Let the first step be a self-assessment of our ability to see the image of God in other people, perhaps by a thorough study of the first chapters of Genesis and the story of Moses as God invites him to see and respond to the oppression of God's people. Study immersed in prayer that seeks to see people and the world as God sees them will open our eyes and ears and prepare us to respond. Taking advantage of the opportunities to participate in Sankofa, Journey to Mosaic experiences, and cross-cultural mission trips will both challenge and transform participants and church leaders.

As a church develops the capacity to see the image of God in other people, let them ask: Who are the marginalized, voiceless, oppressed, and invisible in our neighborhoods, communities, and cities? For example, they may be refugees, people who suffer abuse, children lacking opportunity for a good education, people without legal standing, high school drop-outs, people with addictions, prisoners or victims of crime. They are typically people on the margins, but they sometimes live next door or in the apartment above us.

Once a church identifies a need, further study of the Bible can provide direction and guidance in developing ministries that express compassion and mercy or that work to bring justice. Learning from other Christian communities and churches can be helpful. We may also with humility learn creative and transforming strategies from secular organizations that serve people and offer the "common grace of God" to many. And every congregation is encouraged to participate in some of our Covenant-wide ministries, making good use of the resources and leadership we share. While study is important, compelled by the Holy Spirit, there is no substitute for engagement and action. We cannot claim to be a biblical people if we are not active in God's mission of compassion, mercy, and justice.

In Conclusion – Our Story

In the mid-19th century as Pietism spread throughout Scandinavia, Maria Nilsson, grandmother of David Nyvall who founded North Park University, was joined by other women in her rural district of Sweden to read and discuss Scripture together. To do so, she had to overcome the displeasure of her alcoholic and abusive husband who tied her to the kitchen stove in an effort to prevent her from attending small groups in neighbors' homes where the Bible was discussed and people prayed.

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This simple practice of discussing the Bible and its meaning for life was transformational, leading Maria and her friend, Brigitta Olson, to intervene in the not uncommon practice of auctioning parentless children. While this was ostensibly for the care and nurture of these children, it was usually a form of unregulated child labor and indentured servitude in which many of these children were abused. These women intervened by purchasing auctioned children using funds they raised through knitting and sewing and then selling their products in the community. To accommodate growing numbers of these children, Maria built an orphanage and a school on her meager farm. Compassion, mercy, and justice – women compelled to join with God in “making things right”!

As we today gather to discuss and listen to the powerfully transformational words of the Bible, may these women and others who have gone before us inspire and encourage us as we seek to express and live into God’s compassion, mercy, and justice in our day.

We pray for this through the power of the Holy Spirit and for Christ’s sake.

Bible texts [for scriptural references] cited in the paper – from the TNIV

Old Testament

Genesis 1:31
Genesis 3
Genesis 6:6
Genesis 6:9-10:32
Genesis 12ff
Exodus 3:7, 8, 9
Exodus 4:18
Deuteronomy 24:17-22
Jeremiah 22:15-16
Isaiah 58:3b
Isaiah 58:6
Isaiah 61:1, 2
Amos 2:6b-7a
Amos 5:10
Amos 6:4-7
Micah 6:8
Micah 7: 19

New Testament

Matthew 6:10
Matthew 25: 35-36; 40b
Mark 12:29-31
Luke 4:18, 19
Luke 6:36
John 20:21
1 Corinthian 15:58
Ephesians 2:10
Revelation 21:4