



An Essay: Advocacy as a Spiritual Practice

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For many, the pursuit of justice is not merely a secular endeavor but a deeply spiritual calling. Throughout history, individuals driven by profound faith have championed the rights of the marginalized, finding in their beliefs a powerful mandate for social change. This intersection of advocacy and spirituality is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the struggle for gender equality, and few have embodied it more clearly than President Jimmy Carter.

Jimmy Carter's advocacy for women's rights was deeply intertwined with his profound Christian faith and understanding of scripture. In his 2015 Address to the TEDwomen Conference, Carter identified the "abuse of women and girls" as the "number-one abuse of human rights on Earth," a stark reality he attributed, in part, to the "misinterpretation of religious scriptures." Carter argued that men in positions of religious authority have distorted sacred texts—from the Bible to the Quran—to justify the subjugation of women, relegating them to a "secondary position compared to men in the eyes of God." This critique stems not from a rejection of faith, but from a belief that true spirituality demands justice and equality for all, challenging the very notion that God would sanction such inequality. For Carter, advocating for women is not merely a political or social act; it is a spiritual imperative, a way of upholding the true meaning of his faith against those who would twist it for their own purposes. This commitment to



justice as a core tenet of faith is what makes Carter's work a powerful example of advocacy as a form of spiritual practice.

Advocacy is more than an act of justice. Advocacy is a spiritual practice that expands and deepens our relationship with God and aligns us with God's call to love, to care for those who are marginalized, to make Earth as it is in heaven, to bring about liberation. This article explores the theological foundations for advocacy, grounding it in scripture. It examines advocacy as a spiritual discipline alongside prayer and fasting, and highlights how it fosters inner transformation and communal connection. Drawing on historical and contemporary examples— particularly from Baptist life and Baptist Women in Ministry's advocacy for gender equity in Baptist communities— it illustrates how mentoring, preaching, creating support systems, and systemic change serve as powerful forms of advocacy. Finally, the article offers practical steps for individuals and congregations to engage in advocacy, providing guidance and inspiration as we embrace advocacy as a spiritual practice.

Theological Foundations for Advocacy as a Spiritual Practice

Overall, the Bible is a story of justice. This story portrays a God in relationship with God's creation, people. Unfortunately, this creation chose to fracture the special relationship God had with them. This fractured relationship is seen not only in human relationships, but also in the structures and systems of society. Jesus' life and work are the example of how to restore justice in relationships.

Old Testament

In the Old Testament, justice is a central theme. The concept of *Imago Dei*, that one is created in the image of God, comes from Genesis (1:26–27, 5:1, and 9:6). Since



all humans are created in the image of God, there is dignity and worth in each person. This is the starting point for justice and advocacy: the belief that all people should be treated with dignity, and we should recognize the worth of each person.

The Old Testament also includes stipulations for how humanity should treat one another and how systems and structures should operate to care for one another. Exodus 22:22-27 outlines how God's people should care for the most marginalized and vulnerable in society. God provided liberation for God's people. Mistreatment of and refusing to care for the most vulnerable in society is in direct opposition to this freedom God's people have been given and should give to others. Advocacy rooted in this passage reflects God's call to defend the marginalized, ensuring their voices are heard and their dignity upheld in a world prone to injustice.

Deuteronomy 24:1-25:4 defends the human dignity and worth of people experiencing poverty, calls for the fair treatment of workers, and rebukes slavery. Advocacy inspired by these verses calls for systemic justice that prioritizes compassion, fairness, and the well-being of all, reflecting God's desire for a just and caring community. The book of Isaiah rebukes worship of God that contradicts advocacy for the oppressed and vulnerable (Isaiah 1:15-17), as well as religious practices that promote economic and social injustice (Isaiah 58:6-9). Advocacy grounded in these passages calls for active pursuit of justice and the rejection of empty rituals in favor of tangible acts of liberation and care for the oppressed.



Finally, Micah 6:8 rebukes spiritual piety and religious practices as the sole means of worship. Instead, it states that true worship of God also includes working towards justice and mercy. Advocacy rooted in this verse reflects a commitment to aligning our actions with God's heart for justice, compassion, and humility, transforming both individuals and communities in the process.

As demonstrated above, justice is a central theme in the Old Testament. The above references are not exhaustive or all-encompassing, but they provide insight into how the Old Testament addresses justice. However, justice is not a theme that resides solely within these Hebrew texts. The next section explores how Biblical writers continued to weave themes of social justice throughout the New Testament in the work of Jesus and the early church.

New Testament

The New Testament continues the Old Testament focus on justice. Throughout the New Testament, Jesus stresses justice and advocacy through the call of the greatest commandment to love our neighbors as ourselves (Mark 12:31) and care for the least of these (Matthew 25:40). These verses remind us that advocacy is an act of love that seeks the flourishing and dignity of all people and a profound expression of faith and discipleship.

Jesus also showed how we are to engage in social justice through parables like the Good Samaritan, which highlight that Christians should care for anyone in need and work to address social injustice regardless of the background of the person, group, or



community experiencing it. In Luke 4:18-19, Jesus declares His mission to bring good news to the poor, proclaim freedom for the oppressed, and set the captives free, embodying a divine call to justice and liberation. This passage serves as a cornerstone for understanding advocacy as a spiritual practice. Advocacy reflects Jesus' ministry by addressing the systemic and personal forms of oppression that marginalize individuals and communities.

When we engage in advocacy, we align ourselves with Christ's mission, becoming co-laborers in God's work of restoration and healing. Advocacy calls us to move beyond passive faith into active discipleship, where we not only pray for justice but also work to create it. By seeking freedom and equity for the marginalized, we participate in the sacred act of manifesting God's kingdom on earth—a kingdom marked by love, justice, and radical inclusion. This practice not only transforms the lives of those we serve but also deepens our spiritual connection to Christ, who walked this path before us.

It is clear, even from this quick survey of Old and New Testament scripture related to social justice, that God envisioned a world rooted in justice—a place where everyone has equal access, equal opportunity to participate, and lives together in harmony. Advocacy becomes a vital way to align our actions with God's vision, working to dismantle barriers and create equitable spaces where God's justice can flourish.

Transformative Power of Advocacy



Advocacy can be a spiritual discipline that transforms not only each of us, but also our communities. When we engage in advocacy as a spiritual discipline, we foster deep empathy, humility, and a commitment to justice. We go beyond what impacts us personally to open ourselves to the struggles and marginalization of others and allow God to transform our hearts with compassion for those who are oppressed and marginalized. In doing so, we become even more aware of God's presence in the world and God's call for each of us to act on behalf of marginalized people. As we develop spiritual depth in our advocacy, our actions reflect God's heart, and our communities are impacted by structural change, systemic change, and attitude shifts that lead to equality and dignity for everyone. In this way, advocacy is both an individual and communal spiritual practice that heals, creates unity, and builds God's kingdom on earth.

People engage in spiritual disciplines for a multitude of reasons: strengthening our connection to God or a higher power, personal growth and transformation, and cultivating a sense of internal peace. The term "spiritual discipline" tends to conjure images of quiet and meditative tasks. Centering prayer, Lectio Divina, meditation, and fasting are all prime examples. Yet, in reality, spiritual disciplines come in all shapes and sizes. Spending time in Christian fellowship, stewardship, pilgrimage, and volunteering are all forms of spiritual discipline that emphasize community and action. Similarly, advocacy work can be a profoundly spiritual practice. It cultivates humility and empathy, fostering spiritual growth.



Anna Vogt writes about her work as an advocacy and policy analyst in Latin America.

“The heart of everything that I do, however, can be summed up as joining in the work for social justice already happening in Latin America. The method that I use to support that work is advocacy, and it is within that advocacy that I have also found a spiritual discipline. At first glance, advocacy may be an odd choice for a spiritual discipline. Isn’t advocacy, after all, more about yelling in the street, than contemplation? For me, however, advocacy is much more than simply an angry protest. Rather, I have found advocacy to be a practice of listening and connection. Instead of anger, I have discovered that advocacy is, at its roots, a deep space of hope.”¹

Through advocacy work, Vogt found connection to both her community and to a purpose larger than herself. That connection began with attentive listening to learning. Spiritual advocacy focuses on others, on understanding their needs and perspectives. It necessitates acknowledging our own limitations and lack of complete knowledge—a practice akin to prayer and meditation, where we relinquish the need for control and omniscience.

Vogt reminds us that Christian traditions have a long history of listening for the voice of the Spirit. She says, “When I am invited to join a community meeting or sit with an organization, I often sense that I am hearing that still, small voice.”² Listening to others—striving to understand who they are and what they need—becomes a way of listening for God’s guidance as we are called to care for the vulnerable.

Furthermore, advocacy rooted in love can be a powerful shield against fear and hopelessness. When we look around the world, the challenges can seem daunting, particularly

¹ <https://dojustice.crcna.org/article/advocacy-works-adandvocacy-spiritual-practice>

² <https://dojustice.crcna.org/article/advocacy-works-advocacy-spiritual-practice>



when we consider the plight of women and girls.. We see persistent gender-based violence, limited access to education and healthcare for women and girls in many regions, and ongoing struggles for equal rights and representation. The very act of advocating for women's rights can be met with resistance, even persecution, in some parts of the world. In the face of these overwhelming realities, it's easy to feel helpless. It is in these moments that love-driven action, fueled by faith, and expressed through advocacy, becomes most crucial. It is a tangible demonstration of our commitment to both God and our fellow human beings, a refusal to succumb to despair, and a powerful testament to love's transformative power.

1 John 4:18-21 reminds us: "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because he first loved us. Those who say, 'I love God,' and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also." When faced with challenging, massive problems that tempt us to despair, actively reaching out in love through advocacy becomes a potent antidote, transforming fear into love-driven service. This active love, expressed through engagement with our community, embodies the very essence of loving God and our neighbor.

Finally, advocacy strengthens faith communities by fostering a shared sense of purpose and values. When members of a community engage in advocacy together, they are compelled to articulate and refine their beliefs, leading to a deeper understanding of their shared faith. These collaborative efforts create a stronger sense of unity as individuals align on important issues and work collectively toward a common goal. This shared experience of working towards justice



and embodying their faith in action strengthens the bonds within the community and reinforces their collective identity.