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Redeeming
Justice

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— *Michael Horton*

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HELP THE NEXT GENERATION.

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In a time when the “nones” (or those claiming no religious adherence) are, according to pollsters, growing and when our own churches are stagnant or shrinking, it is more important than ever to identify and celebrate the gospel: the glory of God manifested in the grace he shows to those who deserve the very opposite. This is Christ-centered Christianity at its best, and with the support of our partners we produce resources that help transform churches, prisons, families, and individuals.

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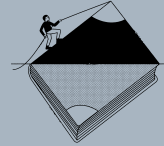


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BY ERIC LANDRY

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In a polarized age, even ideas that used to be held in common can become flash points of distraction and disagreement. Chief among those new areas of division in our own era is the topic of justice. Justice is a theme on which the Bible has much to say, and yet friends—who love the Bible equally and are passionate in its application to all areas of life—disagree with such vitriol about the subject that I wonder what really is informing their opinions. Is it actually true that large swaths of the American church are infected with cultural Marxism? Have denominational leaders, indeed, sold their souls to shadowy figures who operate behind the scenes? Some believe so. Or perhaps the “compassionate conservatism” of the early years of our century has given way to racist and classist political ideology, which has turned the church away from its mandate to care for “the least of these”? Some would point to our current political and cultural climate as evidence for that shift.

As our editors and senior staff have wrestled with this issue, we believe that something more fundamental is playing out on the national stage. Politics is downstream of theology. How we act is in some way a reflection of what we believe; and when it comes to justice, we have misunderstood key components of the Bible’s teaching. So, in

this issue of *Modern Reformation*, we want to go back to basics. We believe that beneath the sloganeering of social media, there is real confusion over what the Bible says about justice and our responsibility as Christians—and ultimately God’s plan for the world.

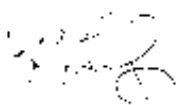
To help chart a new way forward, we asked one of our regular contributors, Zach Keele (pastor of Escondido Orthodox Presbyterian Church), to trace the theme of justice as it is developed throughout the Old and New Testaments. We need to know how the Bible speaks about justice before we can begin to apply that teaching to our own day.

Next, our editor-in-chief, Michael Horton, asks an important theological question: Is justice a law issue or a gospel issue, and why does it matter? Too much of the current conversation about justice misses important theological categories that might help us prevent misunderstanding and misapplication.

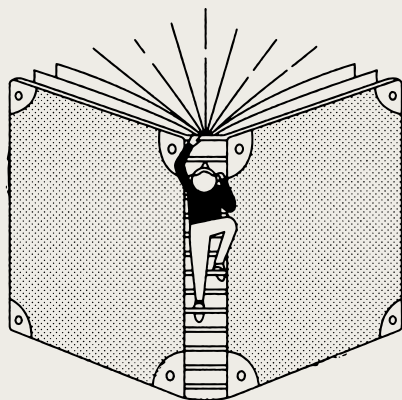
Finally, John Nunes, president of Concordia College New York, returns to our pages for the first time in nearly fifteen years to help us think about our pursuit of justice in light of the in-between nature of this life. Dr. Nunes argues that even though we cannot effect final justice, we are called to a pursuit of “contributive justice”: the good of our neighbor for the glory of God.

I expect that this issue will provoke some feedback. As you wrestle through the topics presented and the arguments made, feel free to connect with us at editor@modernreformation.org. We’ll feature your thoughtful letters and questions in the next issue and, as appropriate, ask our authors to respond. 

**“HOW WE ACT
IS IN SOME WAY
A REFLECTION
OF WHAT
WE BELIEVE.”**



ERIC LANDRY editorial director



PART THREE OF A FOUR-PART SERIES

“I Am Writing to You, Little Children”

by Hywel R. Jones

I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life. (1 John 5:13)

Although John only disclosed the main purpose of his first letter toward its conclusion, it informed all that he wrote. He lived long enough to see the warning Paul gave the elders of the church at Ephesus become a reality and the people led astray by the “twisted things” spoken by “fierce wolves,” who had entered the church and from within its own circle (Acts 20:28–30). He therefore set about

refuting errors and restoring the flock, dealing with denials on the one hand and the doubts they caused on the other. His desire for those addressed was that they should become sure that eternal life was theirs. Perhaps he was remembering the restoration of “Doubting Thomas” in the Upper Room, as he alone recorded the event in his Gospel (21:24–29).

Expressing genuine care and affection, John addressed his readers as “little children” and

“beloved” (see 1 John 2:1, 12, 28; 3:7, 18; 4:4; 5:21) or “children” (2:7, 13, 18; 3:2, 21; 4:1, 7, 11) and warned them against being deceived (2:26; 3:7), which would have such an adverse effect on their fellowship and joy (1:3–4). The Epistle therefore combines the pastoral note (see 2:1, 12–13, 18, 28; 3:7, 18; 4:4; 5:21) with the polemical (1:10; 2:4, 22; 3:10, 4:1, 6, 20; 5:10). The true pastor will therefore always be on guard against wolves that threaten the sheep, even at risk to himself (see 10:11–13). Failure to sound a negative note will blur the clarity of understanding and cut the nerve of confidence. Lies corrupt life and living. It is possible to be too positive as well as too negative! But the contents of this letter should always be used to consolidate and not destabilize Christians, which is the main purpose of apostolic Scripture (see 2 Cor. 10:8; 2 Tim. 3:15–16; 2 Pet. 3:15–19).

We will now attempt a survey of how John goes about this ministerial task in what has been described as “a masterpiece of edification.”¹ What are the “things” he chose to record as being suitable for his purpose? Put briefly, he employs his principle of “the truth in truth” and reminds “[his] little children” (2:1) of what they already know and of its effects in their lives. The verb “to know” (actually two verbs in the original, as we shall see) is used so frequently by him that it must be deliberate on his part. For him, assurance was bound up with knowing and not just feeling—a salutary note for many evangelicals today. He reminds them

of (1) *the time* in which they are living and its dangers, and (2) *the truths* that they truly know. In the process of doing this, John draws clear lines of contrast between light and darkness, Christ and antichrist, God and the devil, and the Spirit of God and the spirit of the world. Such differentiation does not have to generate pride and arrogance. It is basic to a humble confidence.

THE TIME: IT IS “THE LAST HOUR”

John’s “last hour” is no different from Paul’s “last days” (2 Tim. 3:1) and Peter’s “last times” (1 Pet. 1:20). For all three apostles, the adjective “last” is more important than the noun because it means “final.” Another preparatory period like the one that preceded the Lord’s first coming will not occur before his reappearing (2:28), which is the “last day.” Then the saints will be conformed to his image (3:2), and all the world will be judged (4:17). This is “the day of the Lord” spoken of repeatedly in the Old Testament.

Now that the Christ has come and is yet to come again, the “antichrist” is active. Indeed, there are many such antichrists—the one and the many connected by the animating spirit of false prophecy (4:3). The preposition “anti” connotes being “in opposition to,” as is the case with the corresponding term “pseudo-Christ” used by Mark (see 13:14, 22, with parallel thoughts in Matthew and Luke). “Pseudo-Christ” must also be “antichrists,” because they impersonate the

John draws clear lines of contrast between light and darkness, Christ and antichrist, God and the devil, and the Spirit of God and the spirit of the world.

true Christ, arrogating to themselves the glory that is his alone.

Although the designation “antichrist” is used only by John, he is able to say that his “coming” is something about which his readers “have heard.” In this connection, it must be remembered that Paul wrote about the “man of sin” (2 Thess. 2:1–12) and of “times of difficulty” in the last days (2 Tim. 3:1–9).² Whether John is referring to one antichrist to come is a moot question and outside the range of our study, but what is clear is that he used the term to describe the false teachers who laid claim to possess a greater knowledge than what was apostolic (2 John 9). They had been in the congregations he was addressing, and though they had left—perhaps they had been challenged and their teaching rejected (see Rev. 2:2)—they had an unsettling effect on the members. Their departure proved that they did not really belong in the first place. Those that are “of us” stay “with us,” says the apostle, which means that they remain in “what they have heard” and so “in the Son and in the Father” (2:24–25). But some could waver. Perhaps this is the background to the reference to praying for a brother whose sin is not one that leads “to death” (5:16–17).

What were the deceivers claiming that was “extra” to apostolic truth? It can be safely said that they claimed greater knowledge and freedom than Christians possessed. I. Howard Marshall wrote helpfully,

It is hard to tell exactly what the false teachers opposed by John positively believed and taught; it is easier to say what features of the orthodox faith they denied, since John directs his attention mainly to these. Further, we should beware of supposing that every attitude which John condemns must necessarily be attributed to the false teachers, or that their teaching formed a coherent, complete system of thought.³

Their outlook has been described as a “kind of incipient Gnosticism” (*gnosis* being Greek for

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“knowledge”), a movement that became full-blown in the second century. Two of its features have been classified as dualism and Docetism.

Dualist and Docetic Elements

Cerinthus was an opponent and contemporary of John in Ephesus who drew a strict demarcation between matter and spirit, with the latter alone being of moral significance. The former was regarded as the source and seat of evil, and so what was done in or by the body did not count as being sin or sinful (1:6, 8, 10). A kind of antinomianism resulted with an indifference to commandments (2:4, 7–9; 15–17). Consequently, no real union between the divine and the human was possible, and so Christ’s humanity was a semblance and not a reality. (The term “Docetism” is derived from

the Greek verb *dokein*, which means “to seem.”) Cerinthus advocated that the divine descended on Jesus at his baptism, only to leave him on the eve of his Passion. This is why John asserted that Jesus was the Christ “come in the flesh” and “by water and blood, not by the water only but by the water and the blood” (4:2; 5:6). The fact that John followed these words with a reference to the Spirit’s testimony supports the argument that at the root of this two-headed hydra of error was a claim to direct revelation as contrastingly implied in 2:20, 27 and 4:1. John Stott declared, “No system of teaching which denies either the eternal pre-existence of Jesus or the historical incarnation of the Christ can be accepted as Christian.”⁴

THE TRUTHS: “THIS IS THE ...”

In seeking to convey assurance to his readers, John continues in the same vein as in his prologue. He lays down a number of apostolic

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certainities of truth and faith, revelation and its reception, which are scattered throughout the letter. They all begin with the expression “this is the” followed by the nouns “message” (1:5; 3:11), “promise” and “commandment” (2:25; 3:23; 4:21), “victory” (5:4), “testimony” (5: 9, 11), and “confidence” (5:14). This is essential to his pastoral method. We will consider each in the order in which it occurs in the Epistle.

The Message

This is about God revealed in Jesus Christ. It revolves around the twin truths that God is light (1:5) and also love (4:16). Light refers to God’s holiness and righteousness (2:29), but it may also refer to his self-revealing nature. Love is essentially an outpouring of oneself for the benefit of others. It is seen supremely in his giving of his Son for the salvation of sinners, necessitating a propitiating sacrifice on his part (4:10). Basic to everything is that he is life, living, and life-giving (5:20).

The Promise and the Commandment

These are the forms in which the divine message is communicated. They stand for law and gospel. The order in which John mentions them is due to the fact that he is addressing those whose obedience is called for, because they have received God’s love and believed the promise of eternal life (3:1ff.). The life they are to live is one of increasing likeness to Jesus Christ by “walking as he walked,” which is keeping his commandments and turning away from sin (2:1–6; 3:1–3).

The Victory

This triumph is defined as “our faith,” which is believing that “Jesus is the Son of God” as proclaimed by the apostles. It rejects all contrary ideas on the matter and those who present them as “the world,” which is animated by “the spirit of error” (4:4–6). Such decisiveness is traceable to their having been anointed (2:27), which is

The triumphant confession is not only based on the apostles' declaration as true, but it is also the effect of the testimony of the Spirit of God confirming it to the believer.

the same as having been born again (5:4). It is the work of the Holy Spirit alone (3:24).

The Testimony

The triumphant confession is not only based on the apostles' declaration as true, but it is also the effect of the testimony of the Spirit of God confirming it to the believer. External attestation to Jesus as God's Christ has been echoed by the internal witness of the Spirit in everyone who believes their record (5:10). We can say an inward "amen" to what the apostles said and wrote, and do so with the same post-Pentecostal certainty as they did.

The Confidence

This is an effect of the witness described above. The term means "freedom of speech" or "boldness" and is used elsewhere in the New Testament. If there is one word that sums up what is distinctive about the new covenant era, then this is it (see 2 Cor. 4:6). It is used for preaching (or witness bearing) as in the case of John himself, who along with Peter testified before the Sanhedrin shortly after Jesus had been crucified (see Acts 4:13). It also characterizes prayer (3:21; 5:14), being undergirded by the certainty that God will not only hear but also answer requests in accord with his will. Climactically, it is an anticipation of being

welcomed by the returning Lord into his glorious presence (2:28).

CONCLUSION

The expression "this is the" admits of no qualification or improvement—something either is or it isn't (and there is no such word as *isser!*). This definiteness rings loud and clear in our society, which is permeated by relativism and pluralism and, sad to say, is in much of the visible church as well. The assertions it introduces are all brought to a climax in the affirmation "This [or he] is the true God and eternal life" and the exhortation that follows it—namely, "Little children, keep yourselves from idols" (5:20–21), whether material images or mental ideas. Such decisiveness, positive and negative, is part and parcel of the assurance of eternal life. ■

HYWEL R. JONES is professor emeritus of practical theology at Westminster Seminary California in Escondido.

1. G. G. Findlay, *Fellowship in the Life Eternal* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, n.d.), 59.
2. This is the ESV rendering of 2 Timothy 3:1; surely a stronger term than "difficulty" is called for in the light of the context.
3. I. Howard Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 15.
4. John R. W. Stott, *The Letters of John*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1964), 57.



The New Global Theological Forum

by Mark Green

M

ichael Horton and the WHI Team are launching an exciting new column in Modern Reformation. Our prayer is that this new feature encourages all of us as we see

Christ building his church around the world, a church against which the gates of hell shall never prevail (Matt. 16:18). This new initiative invites our brother and sister theologians from around the world to share theological essays that demonstrate why sound doctrine is critical to vigorous church growth. From São Paulo to Nairobi and from New Delhi to Jakarta, we

believe that the challenges of our time are met with vibrant, healthy churches no matter where we live and worship.

THE NEED OF THE HOUR

During my undergraduate years at Michigan State University, the Lord graciously called me to Christ through my involvement with the Navigators. Our Bible study leaders challenged us to put Christ first when we thought about our callings in the world of employment,

friendships, and family. One challenge repeated over and over was in the form of a question: *What is the need of the hour?*

Before seminary and thirty years of tentmaking missions work all over the world, I answered that question with myself at the center. God just needed, I thought, a few men and women willing to give up everything and go to the remotest parts of the world; then he could reach the world for Christ. I was unaware that my self-centered approach neglected the organized church as the main factor in God's equation to get his gospel out to our needy world. I missed seeing that God answers that question with his original group project—the church.

Churches are made up of individuals, of course, and the role of White Horse Inn for thirty years has been to equip individuals to become contributing members of a biblical church. We long to encourage members of local churches to pursue Christ and know the joy God holds out to those who are members of his own body.

We desire to come alongside these churches and encourage brothers and sisters on their pilgrim journey. This fellowship of the saints, guided and taught by the Holy Spirit, is the primary way Christ manifests himself in this age until he returns to set up the new heavens and the new earth. The *need of the hour* is the same now as it was during the time of the disciples: we need *healthy churches*.

MODERN REFORMATION'S CONTRIBUTION: "THE GLOBAL THEOLOGICAL FORUM"

Our promotion of healthy churches happens through our various media initiatives that help believers know what they believe and why they believe it. One of our most effective and popular means to accomplish this happens through our magazine *Modern Reformation*.

At *Modern Reformation*, we want to continue our long-standing dedication and contribution to healthy local churches by launching "The Global Theological Forum." This new column,

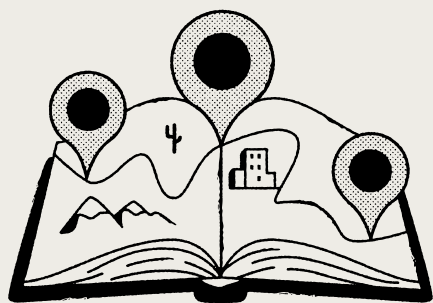
**The need of the hour
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which will be featured in each issue, will provide our *Modern Reformation* readers with firsthand accounts of God's work among his people in places unfamiliar to us. Our brothers and sisters leading and building up churches around the world will encourage us with their theological editorials that come from their uniquely rich cultural contexts. Because of the gracious support and prayers of friends like you, we've established this new theological project. Many of the theologians we will feature as part of "The Global Theological Forum" have become friends over the years through those academic conferences for which you've prayed and supported.

We have much to learn from these international scholars. We are praying that this mutual sharpening of iron on iron will bring praise to our Lord as we band together to see the gospel, in all its fullness and power, preached and taught in churches throughout the world. We are praying that "The Global Theological Forum" will provide our brothers and sisters with a platform to share with us how God is working in their lives and churches. We pray that their wisdom and experience will strengthen and challenge us to be faithful disciples in all our particular contexts.

Please continue to pray for us as we seek to honor our global colleagues with this initiative, and as we seek to see healthy churches multiplied all over the world. Above all, may it bring abundant praise and glory to our Lord of the harvest. 

MARK GREEN is an ordained minister in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and president of White Horse Inn.



Restoring the Church's Role in Missions

by Basil Grafas

I think about missions a lot. I am a pastor and a missionary, and I serve on a missions committee for a church I do not pastor. I think about it every day. I have been a Christian a lot longer: forty-six years. When I started reading the Bible back in 1973, something began to nag me. How Reformed Christians like me take part in missions does not seem to match what I see in my Bible. I know that was then and this is now, but it still bothers me.

Contrary to what some missionary “specialists” claim, it is easy enough to see that the heart of

God’s mission to the world was the local churches. People like Paul went out and planted churches, but his work was always connected to the local church. We also saw churches connected to other churches in promoting the Great Commission. You have to do a great deal of mental gymnastics to avoid the plain sense of this.

That leads me to my dilemma. If that is the plain sense of things, what changed so dramatically that Reformed missions rarely looks like that now? A few smaller Reformed denominations get closer to the mark, but the vast majority of evangelicals (including

Reformed churches) do not. For most, reality means mission agencies—denominational and otherwise—supported by a web of individuals, churches, trusts, and endowments. Local churches have little to do with the real lives of missionaries and their work, let alone exercise oversight of them.

The “whys” are not mysterious. Popular Protestant histories of missions move from the origins of missions in the early church to the expansion of a hierarchical Christianity, which gradually grew corrupt as it embraced Christendom, forcing a Reformation that led to Protestantism, denominations, post-reformational dogmatism, internecine theological disputes, fragmented modernism, and the quenching of the evangelistic spirit. Consequently, voluntary missions societies sprang up. The results were spectacular. Christianity exploded globally in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as Western Christianity put in place an apparatus that worked. These days, we tweak that basic apparatus. We have confronted the colonial mind-set (at least in theory) and sent it packing. End of story. Well, not quite. I am still not satisfied.

Did we outgrow the Bible? Did the foundational structures that emerged in the New Testament become obsolete in the modern world? Alternative histories of missions, such as those popularized by Ralph Winter and Bob Blincoe, of autonomous roving missionary bands of evangelists and monastics muddy the picture with their fictional accounts. Let's keep it basic. Missions emerged from the early church, and the connection between missions and the local church was certain. Did anything change to cancel the foundational truth of that connection? I do not see it. Why then shouldn't we embrace it again?

A standard and sensible response is, in Thomas Wolfe's words, “You can't go home again.” Things have gone so far down a different trajectory that we cannot possibly double back and start all over—not without blowing

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up everything we have to make what we do now align better with a biblical model. We might also add that the church is not obligated to maintain the same dynamics it exercised at the dawn of its existence and the bursting out into the world of missions to the Gentiles.

Lest we become too fascinated by the relentlessness of our own logic, let me suggest a few reasons why we should not dismiss my fundamental conundrum. I will confine myself to two thoughts. First, we need to rethink the way we tell the story of missions. I mean, when we explore Christian history, we need to reconsider how we address missions as a component. For example, mission histories, compared to other histories, are a modern thing. Missions was not spotlighted and isolated as a separate field of study in earlier studies. Christian history is ancient (I still

read my Eusebius from time to time). Focused missions' histories are a twentieth-century phenomenon. Latourette, Neill, Walls, Peters, and other standard works try to place missions within a larger context, but the focus naturally falls on missions. The result is the separation of missions from the story of the church. We cannot helpfully segregate missions and the local church. They are unavoidably related.

Let me illustrate. I commonly think of God's mission to the world as having three dimensions. I liken these to the three strands of fabric that create an oriental rug. Normal rugs have three threads. They have a vertical thread called the warp and a horizontal thread called the weft, and at the intersections of warp and weft, a pile emerges by tying a knot at the intersection of the first two. Another way to say it is that warp and weft are a foundation from which the pile emerges. Here is how I define each dimension.

We cannot helpfully segregate missions and the local church. They are unavoidably related.

The warp is the visible church's engagement in covenantal worship to the Triune God in word and Spirit. The weft is the unity and catholicity of the church, reflecting its identity as being made in the image of God. This is not a denominational identity, but it is a *koinonia* (communion) emerging from shared identity in Christ and shared core doctrine.¹ The pile is the springing up of mission activity that comes from churches that live out a holy, set-apart identity in exclusive worship and devotion to God.

Taken together, we have one holy catholic and apostolic church. That is the church engaged in missions. One final note: These four characteristics of the church were never intended to describe what might be but what already is. Therefore, missions happens when we live out an identity God has already created in us.

The implications of this are obvious. We cannot isolate missions from the state—the health—of local churches, either sending churches or receiving churches. It also means that what happens in the field, wherever it is, must influence senders and receivers. It means that however we innovate locally impacts everyone else. I remember a conference of missionaries and national Christians from a Muslim background. After listening to Western missionaries tell stories, a church planter spoke. He said he knew that the missionaries considered the nationals' countries as "laboratories," but it would be good if they consulted the "lab rats" once in a while. That stung because it was true.

So, as part of understanding how we the church should engage in missions, we need to see ourselves as we are. We typically observe missions through a telephoto lens. We need to look at it through a wide-angle lens. We cannot determine the health of missions without looking through the lens of the church itself. Here are ten observations that directly impact the mission of the church:

1. Westerners are slaves to the marketing gods. We are mostly marketing, not manufacturing; advertising, not producing.

We are blind to the new world. We still think of missions as something that healthy Western churches do for the good of people somewhere else.

2. We are functional gnostics who place our faith in the mystical expertise of specialists rather than do the work ourselves.
3. We are mired in the greatest identity crisis that Christians have faced in over seven-hundred years.
4. The local church is fast becoming indistinguishable from the unbelieving world that surrounds it. We are becoming irrelevant to the point of invisibility.
5. We have lost our fundamental identity as reflections and representatives, no matter what, to the people we live among.
6. The gap between the Western church and the global, suffering, persecuted church is growing rather than shrinking.
7. The short-term mission trips we make are not bridging gaps, neither between nationals and us nor between the generations that went and those that watch.
8. Vast sums go to the maintenance of missions with shrinking returns.
9. The creation of doctrine and theology has decentralized from the local church into autonomous or semi-autonomous agencies (denominational or otherwise), schools, and publications.

10. We are blind to the new world. We still think of missions as something that healthy Western churches do for the good of people somewhere else.

Missions must start with a restoration of the church's core identity, not freedom from it. Some think the problem is that missions is too answerable to the local church. When the concept of mission partnerships (which I will discuss a little later) surfaced, the objections cascaded out of missions organizations and missionaries. It was claimed that local churches were not competent to evaluate what missionaries did. That was true enough, but it was also self-fulfilling. If parachurches—and to a lesser degree, denominational structures—dominate missions, churches will eventually become incompetent. The question is, “Is that how we want it?” Better yet, “Is that the way it should be?” Not if the Bible is to be our guide.

But what of the claim that we can't go home again, given the immense apparatus of missions that rose from the failures of visible churches in eighteenth-century England by embracing voluntary societies? What do Reformed Presbyterians do now that the

The Protestant refugee crisis caused by slaughter became the shiny tip of the spear of missions as well. Nothing better embodied the spirit of early church missions than the Reformation.

nineteenth-century church decided in favor of denominational agency authority over missions, rather than local churches and presbyteries?² Should we undo everything that came because of historical decisions? Can we? I do not know. I know that there are things we can do that do not necessitate all-or-nothing approaches.

If the one holy catholic and apostolic church is a *koinonia* engaged in missions, can we confirm that identity without convening universal church councils eradicating denominationalism? I think we can if we do a bit of historical reimagining. I believe that we have two historical identities that could serve as an Ariadne's thread out of the labyrinth separating the local church from missions. We have already addressed one identity: the early church. I think the other identity we need to embrace is that of the Protestant Reformation.

Missions historians sometimes claim that the Protestant Reformation had no commitment to missions. Reformation historians such as Brad Gregory and Carlos Eire say as much. Missions historians say it more strongly. They hold the Reformation up to serious criticism, particularly as it contrasts to the foreign missions exploits of Franciscans and Jesuits taking Christianity to South America, Asia, and Africa.

When reconstructing history, one should not leave out essential things. For example, Roman Catholics embraced foreign missions because they thought they were the church of Jesus Christ. The church, in its quest to reaffirm its

legitimacy, dug up Rome to find the bones of martyrs that proved its authenticity, even as it was persecuting and killing Protestants by the thousands. Bones, missions, and the stake. All went hand in hand in confirming identity. The Protestants saw it all differently. They knew they were churches on missions. The persecution by Roman Catholics in the Counter-Reformation proved it. Why were they so energetically persecuted? There were two reasons. First, they refused to recant their new faith. More than that, they treated Europe as a mission field. They committed themselves to evangelizing the Roman Catholic world.

The lion's share of that work was done by planting churches throughout Europe. The persecution eventually limited the results, but we should consider how spectacular the scope was. The Reformation consumed all of Western, Northern, Southern, Central, and Eastern Europe. Strongly Catholic nations today—such as Spain, Portugal, Italy, and Poland—were platforms for Protestant church planting and evangelism. Even the Ottoman Empire experienced the reformational movement. Protestants aggressively planted churches that spread missionary evangelism. They did it before the denominationalism that emerged in 1648 after the Treaty of Westphalia existed. They did it by criss-crossing Europe with cooperative missions. Believers in one place supported the missions efforts of believers in another. The Protestant refugee crisis caused by slaughter

became the shiny tip of the spear of missions as well. Nothing better embodied the spirit of early church missions than the Reformation.

So, why not now? If we cannot undo denominations and the modern era of missions, can we learn to recover that reformational paradigm? I know we should, and I think we can. It is possible to work toward an embrace of the work of missions in the local church. Can we recreate cross-border connectional missions (what I call global barn raising) between doctrinally like-minded Christians? I am sure we can. We are already doing it.

One of my hats is that of the chairman of the Bangladesh partnership. At present, nine Reformed churches partner with the Presbyterian Church of Bangladesh (PCB)—a growing denomination of Reformed Muslim converts—to see church planting flourish, initially in Bangladesh but now in a way that helps all of us attend to God’s mission where we live and work. It is, as it was in the Reformation, an omnidirectional relationship. Everyone pitches in to see the gospel advance through church planting. We sank most of the effort into getting a denomination planted in hard Muslim soil. Everyone contributed materially, with prayer, monetary resources, and by going. In fact, you cannot be one of us unless you commit all three to the work. The PCB also comes here, at least once a year. That has two advantages. It allows nationals to tell us how they strategize and execute missions strategy in their own context. The PCB also speaks into our church planting and evangelism. We do not presume that what we do in the United States is at all superior to what they are doing there. We can’t. We do it with them.

In understanding how they go about church planting in a climate of persecution and suffering, they serve as mirrors to us—reflecting to us what our true identities in Christ really are—and we become learners. If the ten observations I shared earlier about us are true, then we need all the help we can get. We listen to one another because we have earned the right. Money cannot

buy that. Most missions partnerships are, in my experience, little more than sanctified business contracts. Not ours. We have a fourteen-year story of sacrificing for one another.

The Bengalis have a word for that: *Bhai*. It is the word for “brother,” but it has layers of meaning. At the surface, it may refer to another countryman. Slightly deeper, it is used between believers, as is common for us. But beyond these is a connotation that means far more. It is the meaning assigned to relationships that involve life and death. You have to earn that personally. You have to sacrifice to get it. Character is at its base. Not everyone in our partnership has gone that far yet, but it exists at the very core of our *koinonia*. Who would not want that, other than perhaps the poor deluded souls who are sure they know what they are doing and do not need help? If you want to find that core, you have to listen to our stories. I think you will understand the difference.

Churches that engage in missions this way know they—and not just their money—make a difference. They understand what they do and why. They know where they fit in. They know what they believe, what is taught, and what they practice. If missionaries are part of the partnership (though never at the center), then the church knows who they are, what they do, and how they can also come along with them. It is a design for working with, not working for or working through. Agencies, as convenient as they are, rob the church of its identity. Partnerships restore it. ■

BASIL GRAFAS is the pen name of an American missionary working overseas.

1. None of the ancient ecumenical creeds simplistically associated “catholicity” with “universal.” The designation was not simply geographical, but it identified genuine communion between believers. Creeds likely found their origins in baptismal formulas. In other words, what must you affirm in order to be baptized as a Christian in the name of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?
2. See Kenneth Joseph Foreman, Jr., “The Debate on the Administration of Missions Led by James Henley Thornwell in the Presbyterian Church 1839–1861,” 2 vols. (PhD Diss., Princeton Theological Seminary, 1977).



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**CHRISTIANS HAVE EVERY
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JUSTICE FOR EVERYONE
IN EVERY SITUATION,
TO LOVE AND SERVE THEIR
NEIGHBORS AND TO
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SIMPLY, BECAUSE IT
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HAS REDEEMED IT.”**

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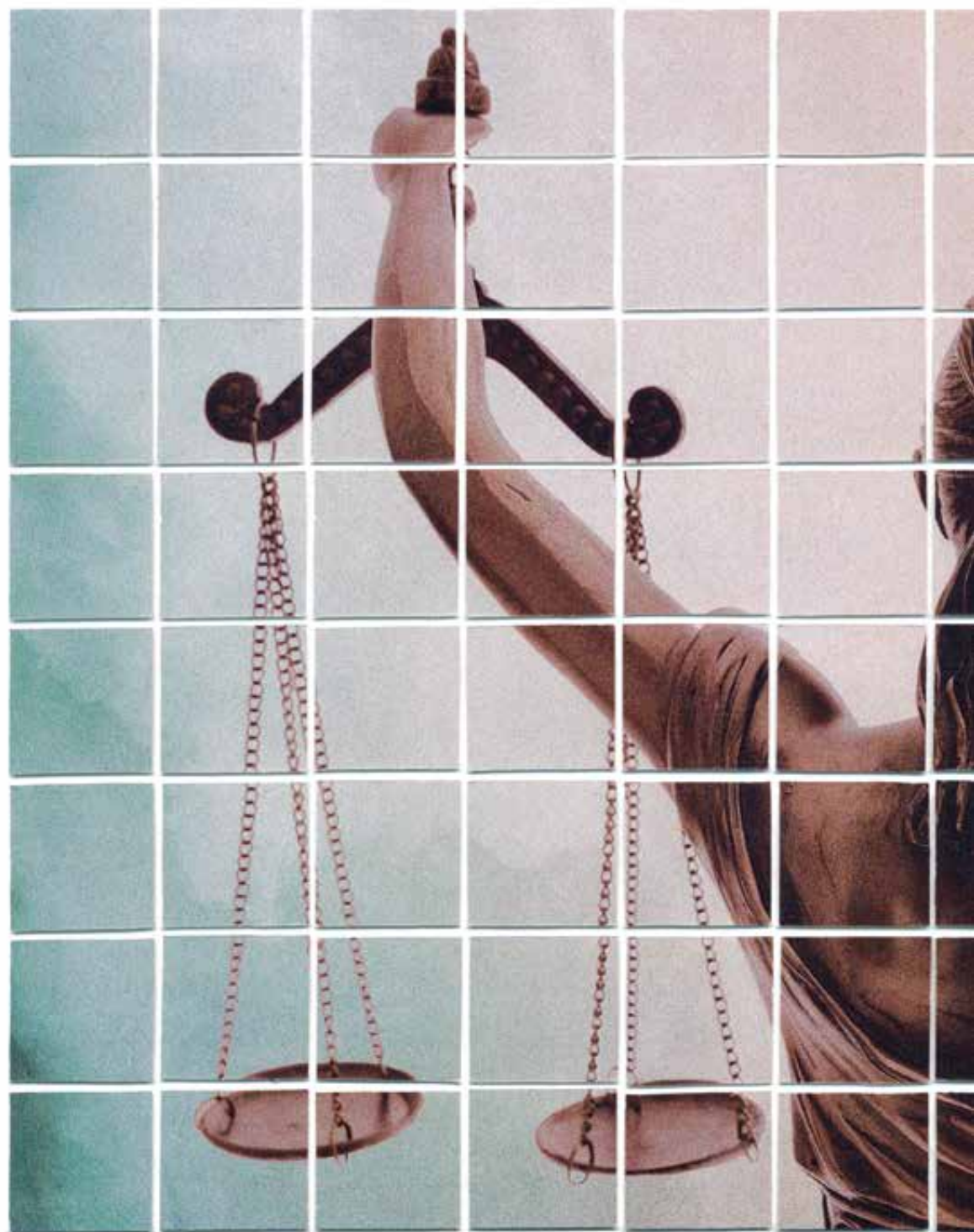
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SIN IS REAL: SO
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A
BIBLICAL
THEOLOGY OF
JUSTICE

→ BY ZACH KEELE

Like it or not, our present lives cannot escape what is trending. Whether it is a kitten on a piano or a drone strike in Iraq, our smartphones bombard us with trends. Many of these last as long as a snowflake on a warm windshield, tickling us briefly only to melt away. One of these trends, however, has thrived into its teenage years: justice. Not only does the topic of justice top the Twitter lists every week, but justice has grown to embrace issues from plastic straws to the Arab Spring. Everyone cares about justice, and every aspect of life must be just.

Yet, as we consume the blogs and podcasts, one cannot help but ask (to spin off of Pilate's question), "What is justice?" What is universally loved is widely debated. For ease of discussion, what the Left calls "just," the Right calls "unjust" and vice versa—and the divisions within our country are also well entrenched in the church. Among evangelical Christians, who profess loyalty to Scripture, little agreement over what justice is seems to exist. It is good, therefore, to ask what the *Bible* says about justice. How does Scripture define justice? More precisely for our purposes, we will outline a biblical theology of justice; and as we will see, it's not an easy task.

As it is with many biblical themes, it is helpful to begin with the end: to gaze on the glory of heaven and mark how the Lord brings us into his never-ending bliss. Indeed, several features grab us from the closing pages of Revelation with respect to justice. First, final and perfect justice is ushered in only by the "final day" and the "age to come." In his wisdom, the Lord overlooks a plethora of injustices and wickedness in this age, but his patience ends on the day of eternity. This justice includes the perpetual fires of hell and the avenging of all wrongs for Christ's people. According to Scripture, all justice sought and performed in this age is imperfect and remedial. For example, the only just restitution for murder is resurrection, which we anticipate when Christ returns.

Second, the performance of this ultimate justice can be executed only by the all-wise and glorified Christ. The wisdom of the Lamb alone

can perform final justice. The saints may share in this with Christ, but the justice is all Christ's.

Third, one aspect of this final justice has already taken place in history in the atonement of Christ. The cross is where Christ satisfied justice for his own, so that believers are saved from the justice they deserve. This is the gospel gem of justice in Scripture, when sinners are delivered from justice and mercy triumphs over justice for us in Christ. In this, the gospel is set over against and contrasted with justice. By justice, we are all condemned; but in Christ, we are justified by grace alone.

Yet, as we trace the trajectory of justice from Genesis to Revelation, three preliminary caution signs need to be posted. The first is that within our biblical discussions about justice, we tend to fall into the chronic error of anachronisms. Without factual evidence, our surmises about biblical characters or ideas are at best guesses, but more often are merely arrogant self-impositions. These self-imposed anachronisms pervasively affect the issues of fairness, rights, and the ideal, which are all part of justice. With patient work, we must humbly chasten ourselves to distinguish between what Scripture actually means and what we as moderns assume it to mean.

The second caution lies in the selective proof-texting that is another trend in our current writings on justice. That is, we pick the Bible verses we like, and we ignore the passages that do not fit nicely into our viewpoint. Many theories of justice resemble more their author's opinion or agenda than the Bible. Two mercies must handle this problem. One, as sinners, our self-orientation constantly steers us toward this error, and none of us are immune. Two, the Bible is a wildly diverse document; therefore, trying to harmonize all the data of Scripture on justice is an extremely difficult endeavor—if not impossible on this side of glory. This is why our approach to justice is *biblically theological*, with quite modest goals.

The third danger in dealing with the issues of justice and Scripture is our modern expectations. We often want Scripture to answer our pressing problems completely and in the

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manner of our preferences. Similarly, our current discussions on justice are juiced up with polemical steroids. In the heat of debate, we demand Scripture to fully endorse our positions and explicitly condemn our opponents' positions. Our present discussions reveal a penchant for simplistic sound bites and talking points. Yet more often than not, the data of Scripture do not easily support either side of the partisan divide, and the Bible is unapologetically complex about justice. Without wisdom, there is no justice, and wisdom is a most elusive virtue for humans. As the discipline of Proverbs so well impresses upon us, there is no learning without first saying, "I do not know." So, we begin our brief time together admitting that we do not really know what justice is.

With these three dangers spotlighted, we are now better equipped to study honestly what the sacred pages of God's word say about justice. We can humbly hold at bay our personal agendas and expectations; and we can be more aware of how different our modern presuppositions are from the ancient world of the Bible, so that we do not impose anachronistic standards on Holy Writ.

JUSTICE AND LAW

While it may sound overly simplistic, the first defining ingredient in justice is the law. When we question what is just, it is the law that defines this in Scripture. On second glance, this only creates more problems for us today. What about unjust laws? We can all point to modern legislation that would not pass the justice smell test. Moreover, laws are in flux from country to country, from past to present; even within the Bible specific laws change.

Scripture is clear that justice is defined by God's law and that the core of this law is the Lord's unchanging moral law, which is summarized in the two laws of love: Love God and love your neighbor (WSC 41–42; Mark 12:29–31; Rom. 13:9). The love-laws form the stable foundation of justice. Yet, in a fallen world, the love-laws cover only part of justice—what is called "primary justice." This is the

positive treatment of your neighbors in which you proactively render to them the respect they are due. It covers both the active “performing good” and “doing no harm.” The Golden Rule (loving your neighbor), however, is only one side of the justice coin.

The other side is rectifying justice, which is the imposition of remedies for the violations of justice. Closely related to rectifying justice is retributive justice: the infliction of punishment for a wrongful or criminal act. In Scripture, rectifying and retributive justice are condensed in the *lex talionis*—eye for an eye, life for a life (Exod. 21:23–25). The *lex talionis* stipulates that justice requires remedies and punishments on lawbreakers and that these penalties should be proportional. Yet, the *lex talionis* is an interesting mix of the literal and the metaphorical. For murder, capital punishment was a literal application. Bodily injuries, however, were not generally repaid with matching injuries under Moses; instead, financial restitution could be employed (Exod. 21:18–19). Furthermore, the *lex talionis* imagery forms the background for much of God’s poetic justice administered in the history of the Old Testament. The takeaway is that applying the *lex talionis* to any particular crime is not always easily done, and ancient applications tend to rub our modern sensibilities the wrong way. In fact, we are at a loss in places to figure out precisely how Mosaic legislation and judges carried out the *lex talionis*.

Nevertheless, in terms of law, the Golden Rule and the *lex talionis* are part of the DNA of justice in Scripture. This two-sided coin, however, does not exhaust the concept of justice. Human rights and the ideal of a righteous society (peace) are key elements in the broader scope of biblical justice.

The law as the basis for justice must be taken deeper. The moral law is comprehended in the *two* laws of love. Our current debates about justice often act as if there is only one—love your neighbor. This is understandable as the conversation focuses on a Christian’s role in a pluralistic society. Yet in Scripture, the crowning justice is love for God. What is the most

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heinous felony perpetrated in history? It is humanity's idolatrous bigotry against the one holy and infinite Triune God. Sure, the two love-laws cannot be separated, but Scripture gives the priority to God. Modern arguments against hell transgress at this very point. They will say God cannot be just if he inflicts an everlasting punishment. But it is precisely for justice that the punishment must be eternal, for it was against the Everlasting One—*lex talionis*.

The final preliminary point about justice as defined by the law is that the moral love-laws do not make a functional judicial system for any government or society. Love needs more laws to define what it means to love; hence, the Decalogue specifies what proper love looks like: not stealing, not committing adultery, and so on. And yet, more information is necessary for a just society. Strictly speaking, the form of the Decalogue is not judicially functional for the court, because no sanctions are attached for disobedience. The whole Mosaic legislation applies the Decalogue for a just society in Israel. But how do we love our neighbor? As we examine the various laws of Scripture, we see diversity reflected in them. The laws change across the history of the Bible; and at many points, the laws of Scripture are difficult to understand and far from exhaustive. Moving from the laws of Scripture to a modern system of justice, however, is a sticky endeavor.

JUSTICE AND RIGHTEOUSNESS

The biblical theology of justice—its place and definition—is observed in the Lord's redemptive story from Eden to Zion. We will map justice using two factors. First, covenant theology is the natural way God has structured Scripture and his plan. In fact, as covenant is the constitution of God's unfolding kingdom, so covenant is the jurisdictional context within which to understand justice. The Lord administers his justice through covenant.

Second, the biblical idiom "justice and righteousness" charts the motif of justice within the great plan of salvation. This idiom

actually echoed across the ancient Near East. Throughout Mesopotamia, it was generally held that the deity elected the king to administer justice and righteousness for the ideal well-being of the land and its citizens. Similarly in Israel, justice and righteousness imply the sublime, divine ideal. The Lord loves justice and righteousness (Ps. 33:5), and his throne is established with the same (Ps. 99:4). This ideal embraced all of social justice in Israel, including deliverance to the oppressed and the punishment of the wicked.¹ The ultimate fruit of this righteousness and justice is peace. Of course, the Lord administered his kingdom through mediators; so by imaging God, the mediators of the covenant were called to do righteousness and justice.

ADAM AND EVE: IN THE BEGINNING

"It was very good." This was God's judgment on his fashioning the first couple after his image, which consisted in true righteousness, holiness, and knowledge (Eph. 4:24; Col. 3:10). Psalm 8 further describes Adam and Eve as adorned with royal glory and majesty (Ps. 8:6). Queen Eve and King Adam were God's vice-regents to execute justice and righteousness, but what did this justice look like? What laws did their righteousness perform? Several essential principles are enshrined in the original covenant of creation.

First, the value and equality of humans stands tall. All humans, male and female, are equally made in God's image. Justice prohibits an inferior gender. Likewise, as all humanity hails from Eve and Adam, there are no inferior or master races. Justice outlaws the foul smells of racism. Moreover, by God's creation, he granted the human right to life. Yet, it is helpful to apply this to both genders. By modern standards, such equality demands sameness in function and order. The Lord, though, does not work out the equality in this manner, as Adam is the federal head of the covenant (Rom. 5:12; 1 Cor. 15:22) and Eve was fashioned as Adam's helpmeet (Gen. 2:18). The current idea that equality must remove any hierarchical order does not fit with what God did. On the other side, Eve is an equal

party in the ruling and subduing in Genesis 1:28, which excludes the passage from being a proof-text for Victorian gender roles. Indeed, besides a basic headship and helpmeet, Genesis imparts very little detail on what a Christian marriage should look like.

Second, Genesis establishes the marriage relationship and purity. In their fruitfulness, man and woman are to cling together to become one, which is the creational foundation for the prohibition of adultery. Yet, in terms of a more full-orbed system of justice, nothing here explicitly addresses remarriage, divorce, or consanguinity. We need more laws to clarify.

Finally, Adam and Eve were called to rule and subdue. The question is, what should this ruling and subduing look like? Surely, the holy couple knew, but the inspired text does not explain it for us—and this is the danger. Our tendency is to color such ruling with our own opinions. Thus you can find libertarian free-market and socialist environmental positions claiming Genesis 1:28 as their own proof-text. Is one correct? Or are they both modern impositions on an ancient text?

Although more details about justice can be assessed from the covenant of creation, these are a sufficient starting point. As God's vassals, Adam and Eve were to perform justice and righteousness. Yet this justice consists of a few skeletal laws and principles. Our duty to do justice needs more meat. So let's see what flesh Scripture adds to these bones.

NOAH: THE RIGHTEOUS RAINBOW

The next covenant is the Noachic or the "common grace" covenant (Gen. 8:20–9:17). With sin now covering the globe, the rectifying side of justice gets a leading role. The flood itself was God's retributive justice for human apostasy and depravity, expressed particularly in bloody violence and polygamy (Gen. 4:23–24; 6:1–4). Therefore, the *lex talionis* gets pride of place with the Noachic covenant (Gen. 9:6), and the use of the *lex talionis* grabs our attention on several levels.

To begin with, the *lex talionis* is linked to the image by a motive clause: "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image" (Gen. 9:6). It is best to apply the motive clause ("for . . .") to the whole preceding law. The image contains value, and its right to life (when taken) requires capital punishment; the image imparts to man judicial authority to administer execution. This proportional justice affirms the human right to life and the authority for humans to carry out rectifying justice.

Nonetheless, as helpful as this law and principle are, they are quite limited. There is no hint about different degrees of murder. What about accidental killings or manslaughter? It is this very specification that is set forth under Moses in Numbers 35, but nothing is explicitly mentioned here. Next, this law covers only murder; no legislation is given that touches on property, perjury, or taxes. While the idea of the fruitfulness of marriage continues from Genesis 1–2, the command to rule and subdue is missing from 9:1. Finally, the covenant overtly grants life to apostates (8:21), which is not tolerated in Eden or in heaven. "Common grace" highlights God's grace to allow sinners, unbelievers, and believers alike the right to life. Rightfully, we find the foundation of religious pluralism in this covenant (WCF 23:3). Yet in terms of developing a theory of justice, honesty demands that filling out the principles here requires care, so that we do not construct a mansion of human opinion on a square foot of biblical text.

ABRAHAM: A PILGRIM PEOPLE

With the Abrahamic covenant, the skeleton of justice begins to gain some weight. Here the idiom of "justice and righteousness" makes its first appearance, as the Lord declares that Abraham will command his posterity "to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice" (Gen. 18:19). What the justice and righteousness of Adam failed to do will be fulfilled through the line of Abraham.

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Yet, the justice of Abraham is strange. His marriage to his half-sister is outlawed by Leviticus 18:9. Jacob’s union to two sisters is also forbidden by Leviticus 18:18. Jacob and Esau practice polygamy (Gen. 26:34; 29:21). Abraham sleeps with the handmaiden Hagar, and Jacob with Bilhah and Zilpah, which qualify as adultery. Abraham’s faith is criticized for going to Hagar, but the text does not judge his sexual purity. Not only that but all the patriarchs and their wives hold slaves. Jacob is a polygamist and a slave owner, who fathers children by his maids. These are deeply offensive to our modern sense of justice and rightly so. But the Lord compliments Abraham by saying, “He kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes and my laws” (Gen. 26:5).

The “justice” of Abraham, then, elucidates how building a theology of justice is no easy task. Abraham also demonstrates how the Lord’s administration of justice is not utopian but provisional, relative, and patient. The Lord mercifully accommodated the broader culture of Abraham in allowing him such marriages and servants. Before our heads swell with self-righteousness, what widespread sins of our world does the Lord overlook?

MOSES: IDEAL JUSTICE?

If justice under Abraham was partial and not ideal, then surely the Mosaic covenant will paint the utopian colors of justice, which is why our modern discussions regularly reach to the Mosaic theocracy for its exegetical foundation. Terms such as “liberation,” “equality,” and “preferential option for the poor” are heralded as the biblical ideal of a just society. Although these words are found in Moses, we need to reflect on their definitions. Today, “liberation” connotes no slavery and equal pay. “Equality” implies sameness in wealth and class, a classless society. “Preference for the poor” defines poverty as inherently oppressive and the poor as more virtuous or authentic. I am not being critical of these ideas; as a product of modernity, I lean toward such ideas. The issue here, however, is whether these ideas are necessarily biblical.

The Lord did redeem Israel from slavery and grant them relief from oppression. The result of this freedom, though, was that Israel became the slaves of the Lord (Lev. 25:55). Slavery of fellow Israelites was forbidden, but the Israelites could buy, sell, and pass on foreigners as slaves to their children (Exod. 21:2–6; Lev. 25:45–36); and Israel was allowed to take women in battle as plunder and as wives (Deut. 20:14). While we today deem such practices as racist, God did not under Moses.

In the land allotment, every Israelite male became a landowner, but sojourners were forbidden from permanently owning property. Citizenship was granted only to Israelites, and sojourners were second-class. Kings, priests, elders, and laity were consistent classes in Israel. As Raymond Westbrook states, “Social justice was regarded in the ancient Near East as the preservation of the status quo” of the hierarchal society, and it was not different in Israel.² The poor were highlighted as special objects of justice. But the Old Testament evaluates poverty as arising out of many sources: oppression, laziness, divine punishment, and bad luck. The poor were under God’s protection (Prov. 19:17), but poverty was not an infrequent curse of the covenant.

Despite these strange forms of justice, the Lord insists over and over again that his grand plan for justice and righteousness will come through the Mosaic covenant. As it says, the nations will marvel at the righteous judgments and laws of Israel (Deut. 4:8). The historical high point comes with David, about whom it is written, “David performed justice and righteousness for all his people” (2 Sam. 8:15). Here, David is painted in idyllic colors—he is the true king. The Mosaic Law embodies perfect righteousness, and David is the king performing this justice and righteousness. Yet two essential concepts need to be highlighted at this point.

The first is clearly seen with Solomon. When God granted Solomon a wish, he praised Solomon for asking for an understanding mind to do justice. When Solomon asked for wisdom to do justice and righteousness, he put his finger on an essential biblical principle: *the law is not enough for justice—wisdom is required*. The Lord

mandates wisdom to apply the law to the endless diversity of moral situations in life. This is what we have seen from Adam, Noah, and Abraham. The skeletal principles and laws demand wisdom from us to apply. It was the same even with the most extensive legislation of Moses.

The second concept appears particularly with the Hebrew word for “vengeance” (*nqm*). This vengeance was appealed to in the breakdown of justice, when it was humanly impossible for a wronged human to obtain justice. For victims, there was no lawful way to redress their wrongs, and personal retaliation was prohibited (Deut. 32:35), so the individual or nation could pray to God to exact vengeance. Within the limits of laws, in the absence of wisdom, the Lord promised his people that he would execute vengeance on their behalf (Jer. 51:36; Ps. 79:10; 94:1).

We, of course, know the outcome of the Mosaic endeavor: the Davidic kings failed to perform justice and righteousness (Jer. 22:3, 15), and their wisdom fell short. The Lord then promised a new and greater king, using the imagery of justice and righteousness. He will succeed where all failed before him, his name will be called “Yahweh is our righteousness” (Jer. 23:5–6), and he will bring justice to Israel and to the nations (Isa. 42:1). The Lord’s plan for justice and righteousness will reach its zenith in Jesus Christ.

THE RIGHTEOUS ONE

Adorned with the promises of Isaiah of releasing the captives and proclaiming freedom, Jesus Christ was going to perform justice and righteousness in the new covenant. Yet given the expectations of the Old Testament, we have to admit that Jesus does not quite measure up. In terms of societal justice, Jesus did little to nothing. He healed a few servants, but he did not grant a single one freedom (Matt. 8:13). He did not free anyone from prison; in fact, he left John the Baptist there to die. Jesus did not help anyone get hired for a job or move them up the social ladder. Instead, he called for people to sell their possessions. Jesus and John certainly exhorted the people to be righteous

(Luke 3:13–14; 19:8) and to cease exploitation. But consider this contrast: about twenty years before Jesus’ ministry, a revolutionary named Judas proclaimed that Roman taxation was no better than slavery and called on people not to pay (Jos. *Ant.* 18.4). Jesus, however, simply asserted, “Render to Caesar” (Matt. 22:21). For the Zealots, being a tax collector was an illegitimate vocation, but not for Jesus. Many of our modern ideas of justice, on the Left or on the Right, look a good deal like gentrification. This, Jesus was not.

Moreover, the apostles’ application of Jesus’ ministry to the church does not help us much. Both Paul and Peter called for obedience and for taxes to go to Rome, which facilitated state-funded idolatry. Paul did not demand that Christian slave owners free their slaves; and the positions of church officers were reserved for men alone. Without a doubt, the apostles robustly believed that the gospel changes lives and makes us fruitful in righteousness and justice. But there is little evidence that Paul expected our obedience to revolutionize the Roman status quo.

So what justice did Jesus clearly perform? It was on the cross. Christ’s atonement satisfied justice and paid the penalty for the supreme injustice: our rebellion against God. Paul could not say it more clearly, “It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus” (Rom. 3:26). Christ fulfilled justice so that we, the ungodly, might be justified through faith and so become heirs of mercy. Because Christ satisfied wrath, we are not treated according to the law as we deserve, but we graciously receive the salvation that we do not deserve. The gospel is about the Father treating us not by the law but by mercy.

What, then, is the next act of Christ’s justice? Again Paul: God “has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed” (Acts 17:31). On the final day, the wrath of the Lamb will come, and his judgment will be just and true. This season of gospel mercy will cease with Christ’s final justice and righteousness. When the New

Testament considers justice, its hope has eyes only for the Consummation.

Where does that leave us? As the church, we are commissioned to herald the free gospel of grace—a mercy that triumphs over justice. We proclaim mercy as the opposite of the *lex talionis*. As individuals, Scripture arms us with the fundamental but skeletal principles of the moral law, and it calls us to wisdom. In wisdom, there is diversity of application within our unity in Christ. Indeed, as we struggle to apply justice and righteousness across our lives and world, we realize just how weak and limited is our wisdom. As our best efforts fall short, as the world hates us for our faith in Christ, grace lifts our eyes away from this ephemeral age to gaze on glory and pray, “Come, Lord Jesus, come quickly.” For then, and only then, will we enjoy the fullness of Christ’s justice and righteousness in the holy peace of heaven. ■

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1. See Moshe Weinfeld, *Social Justice in Ancient Israel and in the Ancient Near East* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 25–44.
2. Raymond Westbrook, *A History of Ancient Near Eastern Law*, vol. 1 (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 160.

REDEMING





JUSTICE

→ BY MICHAEL HORTON

It's been eight years since I wrote *Christless Christianity*, and things don't seem to have much improved out there. Evangelicals on the right fawn over Donald Trump as the "defender of the faith" (apparently meaning the *Christian* faith). After a couple generations of being gripped by the fear of man more than the fear of God and confidence in "that Word above all earthly pow'rs," many evangelicals have shown the world that they will overlook anything contrary to "the faith" for the assurance that Jesus has—or rather they have—a bodyguard in the White House.

Meanwhile, pioneers of yesterday's "Emergent Church Movement," such as Doug Pagitt, have become acolytes for the Democrats. Mangling Jesus' promise in John 14:12 in a move that sounds eerily similar to Joel Osteen's exegetical magic, Pagitt's book *Outdoing Jesus: Seven Ways to Live out the Promise of "Greater Than"* merely substitutes the miracles of the Social Gospel for those of the Prosperity Gospel.

Once again, we encounter a distinctly American Jesus as political football, a mascot in the culture wars, a trademark for whatever sociopolitical ideology one happens to prefer. And since the cycles of political campaigning have become as unending as California's fire season, one can always scan *CNN* or *Fox News* to find a talking head who claims to represent our Lord's political agenda. Whatever one's social, political, or regional demographic, "the (Christian) faith" has become a Christless cloak for group narcissism, which is also known as identity politics.

At least for Christians, it should be recognized that the main casualty in the culture wars is the Christian witness. Most importantly, the gospel has been confused with the law, as if we could save ourselves or America or the world by political policy and cultural power—which means of course that wherever we align, "we" are the righteous and "they" are the villainous and loathsome sinners. The gospel has been just as surely assimilated to the law on the Right as on the Left. But the *law* also has been trampled, and that is what I want to focus on in these reflections.

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Dubbing fellow Christians with whom they disagree as “social justice warriors,” many conservatives fail to recognize that they are just as obsessed with public policy; the differences are merely over *which* agendas to pursue. Is the right to life anything but a social justice issue? To defend civil protection of marriage as between one man and one woman is just as much a concern for social justice as the defense of equality before the law for all, whether gay or straight. We defend traditional marriage because we love God *and* our neighbors, including those rebelling against God’s created order. In fact, the very phrase “social justice” comes from a long history of Christian influence from Augustine to the present.

According to Katherine Connor Martin, head of US dictionaries for Oxford University Press, the moniker only became a slur in 2015 in the wake of the Gamergate controversy.¹ Deployed routinely as an insult by *Fox News* hosts, “social justice warrior” has become the scarlet letter attached to anyone who raises concerns about the environment, racism, poverty, or other issues that Christians, including many conservative Protestants, have traditionally cared about.

In 1947, Carl Henry’s *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism* called evangelicals to a more theologically robust awareness of public responsibility. In the 1970s, Francis Schaeffer awakened American evangelicals to the scandal of abortion-on-demand and euthanasia. But few today remember his provocative critiques of other tentacles of nihilism: *Pollution and the Death of Man* and extensive challenges to racism and apathy toward those who suffer economic injustice in such works as *Whatever Happened to the Human Race?* and *A Christian Manifesto*.

I understand why many Christians bristle at the term “social justice.” Over the past decade, it has been coopted for a radical liberal agenda. “Fundamentalist” in its bullying demands, the secular Left has been remarkably successful in its sweeping experiment of social engineering. And it happened with whiplash speed. One need only recall that in 2008, presidential candidate Barack Obama opposed same-sex marriage

“for religious reasons” and by 2015 draped the White House in rainbow lights to celebrate the Supreme Court’s endorsement of same-sex marriage in *Obergefell v. Hodges*.

But the radical extremism of the Left has only pushed the other third of America into its own kind of extremism. What remains in this Manichean war between Light and Darkness is a division into two parties that seem to share little in common for the public good. In fact, some conservative brothers and sisters cannot even talk to more progressive fellow believers—those who don’t think that global climate change is a hoax or that being a person of color, a woman, or poor stacks the intergenerational deck—without charges of heresy. I have been in meetings where Francis Schaeffer would have been booed with shouts of “social justice warrior!” Aided by overactive bloggers and trigger-happy Twitterers, Christians and churches in the United States have not been this divided since the American Civil War.

In 1986, Dana Carvey’s character Enid Strict (a.k.a. “The Church Lady”) debuted on *Saturday Night Live*. But we had already met her in the late nineteenth century, when she was the leader of the Temperance Society, preaching hellfire for the men in the saloon, and marching for women’s rights. In both Britain and America, progressive politics emerged within such dissenting evangelicalism, especially the revivalism of Methodists and Baptists. Then in the 1920s, American Protestantism divided into “modernists” and “fundamentalists.” The former gave up Christianity for a Pelagian anthropology and Arian Christology, paving the way for today’s gnostic secularists. While posing as liberal and open-minded, the secular Left exhibits what remains of its revivalist fervor, moral superiority, and censorious finger-wagging. One can hardly imagine a more self-righteous modern “Church Lady” than the average *CNN* talking head or college student body president. Pressing the imagination, such representatives employ legalistic rhetoric for what are essentially antinomian principles. There are no moral absolutes, except the ones the priests of the Left agree upon—and for

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which they are willing thereafter to persecute others for questioning.

Not to be outdone, conservative Christians often share more in common with their leftward nemeses than they suppose. For them as well, politics is the sharp end of the spear: change the government and political policies, get enough judges on the bench, and America can become a “Christian nation” again. To raise the issues of social justice, other than defense of the unborn and traditional marriage, provokes the charge of “social justice warrior.”

Conservative parents and pastors have every reason to be concerned when the younger generations bring secular brainwashing into the church. But it might humble us to bear in mind that they are reacting against their elders’ secular brainwashing on the Right. Pastors and other Christian leaders appear regularly on television—and in the pulpit—not as experts in God’s saving revelation in Christ, but to preach public policy or to defend the president. More time seems to be spent pontificating on politics instead of exegeting Scripture and announcing the greatest story ever told, in which they remind us that there is a better city with lasting foundations.

But the earthly city matters too in its own way. In the remainder of this article, I want to challenge us all to recover robustly Christian categories for thinking about and acting on matters of public justice.

THE LAW AND THE GOSPEL: AGAINST THE Gnostics

Two of the most potent heresies in the ancient church and ever since are Gnosticism and Pelagianism. They both contradict the law and the gospel, but in different ways. Confident that human nature is not fallen and can be improved by moral effort, Pelagians see God’s grace as no more than giving us the right instructions and maybe a little empowerment along the way. Gnostics, however, view the Creator and Law-giver of the visible world as a maleficent demon, who intends to imprison our divine inner self within the limitations of embodied nature with

its laws. I’d like to focus on the gnostic impulse that exhibits itself in certain forms of progressive and conservative movements today.

Let us recall that God’s law consists of everything in Scripture that faces us with God’s demands. Even those who do not have God’s written word know by nature what the law requires; it rings in their conscience (Rom. 2:14). But ever since the fall, no one fulfills these demands: “No one is righteous, no not one” (Rom. 3:10). The gospel, on the other hand, is God’s word of mercy. After telling us that “by the works of the law no one will be justified,” Paul adds,

But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. (Rom. 3:21–24)

Christianity may be undermined by assimilating the law to the gospel (antinomianism) or the gospel to the law (legalism). The first gnostics were united in despising the visible world and its alien god—whom they identified with Yahweh, the Jewish God of the Old Testament.

On this basis, some were antinomian: Why not show off your rebellion against the God of creation by flouting his law? Besides, life in the body here and now is of no consequence. Regardless, even if orgies and trysts were frowned upon, they were merely *occasional* sins as opposed to marriage and procreation, which represented a *state* of sin. But most gnostics were ascetic: they forbade marriage and the eating of certain foods and wine and participating in common worldly activities that contribute to material well-being. Antinomianism and legalism were just two sides of the same coin of condemning this world as intrinsically evil and opposed to the inner spirit.

From the same premise, some gnostics wanted to flee the world and the body, flying away to the upper realms; while more

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revolutionary types wanted to destroy this world and erect a new one—of pure spirit, ruled by the “godly”—on its ashes. One thinks of the fateful experiment of Luther’s nemesis, Thomas Müntzer. As Marx and Engels pointed out so long ago, radical Anabaptists like Müntzer were pioneers of what is known today as progressivism. But they are also mediators of the gnostic impulse that encompasses much of conservatism today.

Classic conservatives affirm the natural order. Sometimes they do so in a way that absolutizes the status quo and ignores the claims of justice and genuine progress in human rights. As G. K. Chesterton quipped,

The whole modern world has divided itself into Conservatives and Progressives. The business of Progressives is to go on making mistakes. The business of Conservatives is to prevent mistakes from being corrected. Even when the revolutionist might himself repent of his revolution, the traditionalist is already defending it as part of his tradition.²

But much of the Christian political and social conservatism that I see today seems more like just another sort of gnostic sect.

Progressive gnostics bristle against the very idea of nature; the world and the self are merely empty canvases on which we may apply our creative designs. We are not created but are self-creators—indeed, divinities in our inmost being. Our body is a plastic container we can manipulate, sexualize, advertise, and indulge as we see fit. There is no intrinsic design, origin, purpose, or goal for human beings—just a menu of endless options for expressing the inner self we elect to become. Forget the messiness of embodied, committed, mutually dependent relationships. Gratification is just a mouse-click away. The nihilistic despair of our age, especially among younger generations—evident in anxiety and depression, the soaring rates of suicide, addiction to smartphones, pornography, drugs, and alcohol—is the fatal index of this denial of being *creatures* of a Creator

WHAT'S MOST IMPORTANT?

Meditate for a moment on the climactic scene in John 18:6–11, when Jesus was arrested, betrayed by one of his intimate circle. “When Jesus said to them, ‘I am he,’ they drew back and fell to the ground.” Here was a man without so much as a stick in his hand, and the Roman soldiers were terrified merely at being in the presence of the one whose claims about himself were already demonstrated by his miraculous signs and words. “So he asked them again, ‘Whom do you seek?’ And they said, ‘Jesus of Nazareth.’ Jesus answered, ‘I told you that I am he. So, if you seek me, let these men go.’” Is

this not *in nuce* what Jesus was about to do on the cross, giving his life for his friends? “This was to fulfill the word that he had spoken: ‘Of those whom you gave me I have lost not one.’”

What good news! He had told them this in John 10: not one of his sheep will be lost. And just prior to his arrest, in his prayer to the Father, Jesus had prayed not for himself but for “those you have given me, for they are yours and you gave them to me” (John 17:9). “*I have guarded them, and not one of them has been lost* except the son of destruction, that the Scripture might be fulfilled” (17:12; italics added).

We have heard a lot of fear-mongering about everything being lost if the next election goes awry. But in John 18, Jesus says that the most important assurance that he—as the one who possesses all authority in heaven and on earth—can give is that not one of those who trust in him will be lost to everlasting punishment; he will save and guard his own. “Then Simon Peter, having a sword, drew it and struck the high priest’s servant, and cut off his right ear. (The servant’s name was Malchus.)” This is the sort of bravado we have come to admire. Yet in this story Peter is not the hero, nor

even a proper villain like Judas; he is the fool who, misunderstanding Jesus’ mission at its heart, follows his own impulses. Isn’t it interesting that Peter’s act is remembered to this day, not because of its virtue but because it is a silly and trivial footnote to Jesus’ epoch-turning act of selfless sacrifice? “So Jesus said to Peter, ‘Put your sword into its sheath; shall I not drink the cup that the Father has given me?’”

As Mark reports, each of the three times Jesus foretold this “cup” that he had to drink, Peter rebuked him: “No, Jesus, you won’t be handed over—I’m not going to let that happen. Don’t

who made us a certain way, for himself and for one another.

Conservative gnostics may appear at first to be otherwise. After all, they stand for Judeo-Christian culture, affirming “one nation, under God,” and insist that there is a law above the laws of the land. And yet, one discerns a different version of this world-despising attitude: This world is just a sinking ship and the most responsible thing is to save as many souls as we

can, to paraphrase the evangelist D. L. Moody. On one side is the soul, which needs saving; on the other side is the body, which is destined to perish along with the visible world. This is a gnostic rather than a Christian eschatology. Christians proclaim “the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting.” We proclaim redemption, not annihilation; the world saved from the reign of sin and death, not “the late, great planet Earth.”

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worry. I'm your bodyguard!" And even at the Last Supper, Peter swore he would never let Jesus go to the gallows. "Jesus answered, 'Will you lay down your life for me? Truly, truly, I say to you, the rooster will not crow till you have denied me three times' (John 13:36–38). This was after Jesus washed his disciples' feet as a parable of his crucifixion for their sins, even as Peter protested, "You will never wash my feet!"

All the way to Golgotha, Peter was a theologian of glory, not of the cross. Presuming to be Jesus' bodyguard, he was actually behaving as a bully. The disciples may have thought

well of Peter at first for his courage. But from Jesus' perspective, Peter just got in his way, claiming the spotlight of glory right at the moment when the Father was putting it on his crucified Son.

Christians in the United States today are being bullied on both sides by those who seem to misunderstand Christ's mission. The most important thing is not who wins the next presidential election, but Christ's victory over sin and death. This is the victory celebration in which we get to participate every Lord's Day, sharing it with a world that desperately needs to hear this saving, good news.

Those who believe we are saved *with* our bodies and this world will live in grateful thanksgiving, loving and serving our neighbors in body and soul (Rom. 8:18–25). Those who believe we are saved *from* our bodies and this world will naturally assume that the stewardship of creation and justice toward our neighbors are a distraction at best and heresy at worst. Thus the two versions face off every day in our society, especially in the perpetual news and election cycles.

"Righteousness" is one of the central themes of the Bible. Without it, God would not be God; this world would be the work of the devil (or random, meaningless chance—which amounts to the same); the claims of justice would be dismissed rather than fully met in the person of Christ. Without righteousness, the guilty would be let off (as Marcion advocated), not justified; the world would be destroyed (a common gnostic hope) rather than restored; God's redeemed would be left under the power of sin, looking forward to dying (or killing) instead of "the resurrection of the body and life everlasting."

It's not that evangelicals don't talk about righteousness. On the contrary, social and personal holiness have been the twin sails of American revivalism—to the point at times of sailing into Pelagian waters. But it is mostly the righteousness we think *others* lack. Marsha Witten documented this in her fascinating study of sermons on the Parable of the Prodigal Son. Southern Baptists and mainline Presbyterians differed sharply over who was in the doghouse—the prodigal who left his family for sex, drugs, and rock-and-roll, or the stingy older brother. But they agreed in deflecting sin to outsiders.³

As Dietrich Bonhoeffer, however, observed after his American tour,

God did not grant a Reformation to American Christendom. He gave strong revivalist preachers, men of the church, and theologians, but no reformation of the church of Jesus Christ from the Word of God. . . . American theology and the church as a whole have never really understood what "critique" by God's Word means in its entirety. That God's "critique" is also meant for religion, for the churches' Christianity, even the sanctification of Christians, all that is ultimately not understood.⁴

It is a bare theism or civil religion—something to which Bonhoeffer was acutely sensitive from his experience (and eventual martyrdom)

in Nazi Germany. “Christendom, in American theology,” he added, “is essentially still religion and ethics.” As a result, he concluded, “the person and work of Jesus Christ recedes into the background for theology and remains ultimately not understood, because the sole foundation for God’s radical judgment and radical grace is at this point not recognized.”⁵

PUTTING JUSTICE IN ITS PLACE: LAW (JUSTICE) AND GOSPEL (JUSTIFICATION)

Social justice, both the idea and the phrase itself, was formulated within a Judeo-Christian framework. If we think the term has been co-opted by radical progressives, the questions then are: What do we put in its place? What is an alternative name for this claim that God places on all of us to love our neighbors?

How about “public justice”? Or, along with the Protestant Reformers and their heirs, call it “civil justice”—that righteousness in relation to fellow humans (*coram hominibus*) that falls short of righteousness before God (*coram Deo*). Whatever name we give it, according to Scripture there is such a thing as systemic, social, public sin, especially when a particular group has a history of being subjected to injustice. The fact that we are no longer under the old covenant theocracy does not obviate the fact that God holds people accountable, not just for private sins but for public ones. America has no covenant with God (and if it did, it has never been kept). In the new covenant, the church is a worldwide empire of priests, not merely a geopolitical nation. But like all other nations and their leaders, the United States will be judged one day. And the God who told Israel what he hates—oppression of the widow, the orphan, the poor, and the alien; who says “the earth is mine and everything in it” (Ps. 24:1) and reserves his wrath for those who sacrifice children to Baal—is the same God who will arraign the world before his throne on the last day.

God takes his righteousness, or justice, seriously because he created the world naturally good and humans in his own image. There is

a created origin, purpose, and goal—that is, a nature—that we did not and cannot choose or unchoose for ourselves. Take away justice and you deflate the whole cosmos of its ethical significance. If the creator of the visible world is someone or something other than the sovereign God, then nothing we do matters.

Now to be fair, the folks I have in mind are only half-hearted gnostics. In both liberal and conservative versions, some concern for the body and this world remains. Liberal gnostics may not be troubled by an elective procedure involving the partial birth of an infant with a beating heart, crushing his or her skull and discarding the “fetus” (simply, Latin for “offspring”) as no more than a ball of tissue. But they are terribly concerned that the children whom parents elect to keep have good medical care, safe drinking water, and clean air. For conservative gnostics, the issues are exactly reversed. And for some at least, it seems that bodies matter when it comes to same-sex relations but not as much when women and children, even in the church, are abused.

But gnostics of any stripe have no good reason to care about any of these issues at all. By contrast, Christians have every reason to seek justice for *everyone* in *every* situation, to love and serve their neighbors and to embrace the world simply because it is God’s world and he has redeemed it.

When I hear conservative Christians lambast “social justice,” I ask them: Do you believe that God is righteous and that the same God who justifies the ungodly in his Son according to his gospel lays a claim on them to heed the commands of his law? What is social *in*justice other than collective sins? We were not created alone, we did not fall alone, and we are not redeemed alone. In both creation and redemption, we are social creatures. As such, we are both sinners and sinned-against, and we sin not only by ourselves but with other sinners, seeking to justify ourselves as belonging to the right group and condemning other groups on which we can project our own fear, anger, and insecurity.

We do not rightly divide the word when we either confuse the law with the gospel or

dispense with either. No one is justified by refraining from homosexual practice, but those who are justified are new creatures in Christ, required to abandon such a lifestyle. Abortion is not the unpardonable sin, but does that mean Christians are free to sin? With the apostle Paul, we must say, “By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?” (Rom. 6:2).

On the one hand, we know that we cannot transform the world into a perfect society, any more than we can attain perfection in personal holiness. We wait patiently for the return of the only Redeemer to raise our bodies in glory and to fill the earth with ultimate justice, peace, and righteousness. On the other hand, “we press on” in repentance and faith—not only in guarding our hearts against pornography but also against our complicity in social injustices.

He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? (Mic. 6:8)

Justice matters, because the Creator-God matters. The earth doesn’t belong to CEOs or politicians. We aren’t left here merely to save souls, waiting for the world to burn while we demand our share of personal peace and affluence. In Christ, the Father made all things, visible and invisible; by his same Son, he redeemed all things, visible and invisible.

Just because our good works cannot justify us does not mean that they do not glorify God and serve others. Just because God’s common grace in the City of Man merely restrains sin, rather than cancel its debt and bondage, does not lessen its value. Just because we will not reach perfect justice between neighbors in this age does not mean we should not reach for greater justice than we see around us. Just because we are not called to save the world from environmental disaster does not mean we should not seek to be good stewards of God’s creation. Christ is Lord not only over the church in saving mercy, but also over the whole earth in providence and, at the last, consummated grace.

To uphold the law is not only to affirm the Triune God as Creator, but to testify to that righteousness—ultimate justice—that he fulfilled by his mercy in his Son. Besides the law and the gospel, the most difficult distinction to hold simultaneously is the *relative* justice to be pursued in the temporary kingdoms of this age and the *ultimate* justice that will be realized at Christ’s return. Justified by grace alone, every Christian is obligated to pursue justice toward all. Not because we are our own and can do whatever we want, but because we are the Lord’s by right of creation and redemption do we discover the freedom to embrace others—believers and unbelievers—as a gift rather than a threat. We will not all agree on every policy issue (either personal or public ethics), but as Christians we may never dispense with the responsibility to look up to God in faith *and* out to our neighbors in love. 

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1. For this intriguing development, see Abby Ohlheiser, “Why ‘Social Justice Warrior,’ A Gamergate Insult, Is Now a Dictionary Entry,” *The Washington Post* (October 7, 2015).
2. G. K. Chesterton, *Illustrated London News* (April 19, 1924), <https://www.firstthings.com/blogs/firstthoughts/2010/01/chesterton-on-checks-and-balances>.
3. Marsha Witten, *All Is Forgiven: The Secular Message in American Protestantism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).
4. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “Protestantism without the Reformation,” in *Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Works, Theological Education Underground: 1937–40*, vol. 15, ed. Victoria J. Barnett, trans. Victoria J. Barnett et al. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012), 438–62, esp. 61–62.
5. Bonhoeffer, “Protestantism without the Reformation.”

SIN
IS REAL:
SO IS
CONTRIBUTIVE
JUSTICE

→ BY JOHN ARTHUR NUNES





Whoever suffers from the malady of being unable to endure any injustice, must never look out of the window, but stay in his room with the door shut. He would also do well, perhaps, to throw away his mirror.

—Johann Gottfried Seume¹

The very term “social justice” is experienced as a phrase of legitimacy among some Left-leaning Christians and, correspondingly, as a certain clue of apostasy by some on the Right. There is much that we could and should argue about here, but what’s entirely indisputable is this: Christians do undertake good works to right wrongs. This conversation seems to get hotter and less luminous, however, when the question arises about what constitutes specifically a positive or a negative contribution to the ethical. I will not be attempting to add to the heat with my muddling judgment on this question, but neither are my two starting points to shape the scope of this article without controversy. They are, namely: (1) that to be a citizen of both God’s empire *and* of the United States of America implies being a moral being; and (2) since justice is a matter of morality, it must derive from the one who is the transcendent source and summit of justice.²

What I will attempt to demonstrate is that because of the pervasiveness and perverseness of evil, the best approach to address injustice is grounded in God’s preemptive mercy—what I term “contributive justice.”

BATTLEGROUND WHERE GRACE ABOUNDS

Since sin abounds, any Spirit-led responses to God’s gracious bestowal of righteousness through Jesus Christ should inevitably include, like good fruit growing from a good tree (Matt. 7:17), the pursuit of justice. Despite Western overconfidence in its false religion of radical individualism, being Christian is never a solo performance. Even in their personal actions, Christians work—knowingly or not—in conjunction with a body of fellow believers (Rom. 12:4–5). Their hopes, when they dream

of a better world, are entwined with dreamers, martyrs, saints, and prophets of times other than their own and from places near and far. Likewise, the issues they tackle include both the unjust structures in society and the unjust actions of individuals. Yet there’s no room for sanctimonious delusion: working to address the consequences of sin is itself tainted by sin. We comprehend the former more easily than the latter—namely, it’s easier to see the consequences of sin in others than it is to discern that stain in ourselves.

Since no human action—including the pursuit of social justice—is unimpacted by sin, even the most purely motivated deeds will produce unintended consequences, collateral repercussions, and unforeseen negative results. Therefore, any form of activism—whether progressively advancing a cause or traditionally protecting a freedom—requires limits. I will argue for contributive justice as a preferred approach because (1) it affirms the human dignity and capacity of communities taking responsible action for themselves; (2) it proposes realistic restraints on efforts to correct or defend against societal ills, so that the corrective action doesn’t cause more ailment than what it’s aiming to cure; and (3) it entails an approach that is more pragmatic than theoretical, more useful than ideological.

STREET-LEVEL WISDOM

When I worked for Lutheran World Relief, headquartered in the Inner Harbor section of downtown Baltimore, I’d frequently walk the two miles from my loft apartment to the job. Every day that involved this good exercise, my route took me past a woman living a crushed existence—a street lady, you might call her. She resided among cardboard boxes and tattered bags filled with odds and ends. This woman, whose name none of us knew, was a talker. “You’re really just like me!” she shouted out one day to those hurrying by, their eyes averted, to their jobs. “You’re just one step away from death, and there but by the grace of God you could be

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in my shoes!" The daily damnations she experienced in being seen by most as a menace to society, with no fixed address, prepared her to be an outdoor prophetess. As Martin Luther once noted, "One becomes a theologian by living, by dying and by being damned."³

More than once during my pedestrian commute, while I could avoid her gaze, I could not ignore her piercing insights. With a crackling, staccato voice, she spun clever truisms about the universality of trouble and troublemakers. Through blue sighs of lyrical despair, she articulated what so many of us knew to be true, but in our plastic pride couldn't bear to admit. One of the classic phrases she intoned that seemed to come from an authority superior to us all was, "God don't like ugly, and he ain't too impressed with pretty."

Her theological worldview was on target: Since God is just, God stands on the side of justice. This is good news for sufferers. But for those who cause suffering, God's law lances their stubborn pride and sees piercingly through their hypocrisies. In retrospect, my conscience heard her calling, or God's calling through her, for us to turn from our unreflective investment in a materialist-scientific technocratic world of social media fakery, and to return to the good, the true, and the beautiful. This is a vocation toward justice. This is the motivation for justice. This is God's call.

Since justice is a concept that cannot be untied from morality, which is itself necessarily embedded in a theological worldview, the implications of justice cannot be contained in any single sociological category, political domain, or historical era. Justice relates across epochs and cultures to judgments of what is fair and right. Further, as a transcendent ideal, justice is related to natural law. There exists a judicious temperament written on every human soul,⁴ whether legible or illegible. Therefore, there tends to be a common judgment with which people ordinarily and instinctively agree. There is little new here for those who adhere to classic Christianity: "They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears

witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them” (Rom. 2:15).

A BLIND SPOT

Not only is justice a category that permits us to arbitrate right and wrong, but the one who writes it on our consciences also moves individuals and societies, ordering their lives together to then act accordingly. That is what is at work particularly in the civic experiment known as the United States of America. Here, the bold claim is to know from natural law that “we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights.” This derivative ingenuity of the Western natural rights perspective—tied inextricably, I believe, to the Judeo-Christian tradition—consists in this notion: that every human person possesses inherent dignity, value, and worth, and every life, from conception to natural death, carries meaning and purpose. It concerns me that this core and foundational Western achievement is at risk.

Reinhard Hütter describes a blind spot in Western secularism, a consequence of the erosion of authority in the West, leaving the residual of a culture that breathes in “the aroma of an empty bottle”—*der Duft einer leeren Flasche*. We abide with habits and customs that derive from the fruit of faith without fully realizing that we have forsaken the root of faith—our religious tradition. Since this is the case, how long can it be before life itself loses the essence of truth and meaning, as well as the effervescence of goodness and authenticity? These components of the life that Jesus Christ came to bring (John 10:10) align with Aristotelian notions of *eudaimonia* or human flourishing. Most damagingly, a disconnection from the source of the good, the true, and the beautiful makes it increasingly difficult to locate frameworks for moral decision-making, including the implementation of justice. In other words, our pursuits of liberation, our pining for unfettered freedoms, and our yearning for

disentanglement from tradition conceivably lead to less, not more, justice. The recovery effort of Christians to address this drift should emerge from the grass roots, employing contributive justice.

JUSTICE FOR MORE THAN JUST US

There are at least three ways of thinking about justice, over against which I’d like to posit this notion of contributive justice. I am oversimplifying to economize words:

1. *Distributive justice* refers to the allocation of goods, especially with respect to the outcomes.
2. *Retributive justice* focuses on the application of punishment, as well as theories of criminal rehabilitation.
3. *Restorative justice* pays attention to the needs of the victim and the offender and the conditions of reconciliation.

In contrast to these, I propose *contributive justice*, which I define as follows:

Set free by God’s grace in Jesus Christ, we act within our vocations and locations in order to promote sustainably full human flourishing among our families, our neighborhoods, and our global neighbors.

We ourselves take what we have to work where we are. We don’t wait for external intervention; we take action.

In so doing, contributive justice affirms the fundamental agency and capacity owned by human persons as created in the image of God. They bloom where they are planted. They start by responding to the needs of others within the concentric circles where life is lived—self, family, community, and the world. While it is much easier to love the abstract neighbor who resides, say, in some perniciously impoverished nation overseas, it is much more effective and

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productive to get one's hands dirty in a down-to-earth, face-to-face love of the neighbor who is your "near-dweller," the etymological meaning of *neigh-bor*.

Confessional Lutherans and biblical evangelicals have historically tended to thematize justice not as social action but primarily as conjugated within that saving act delivered by God in Jesus Christ. In this view, justice relates to that doctrine on which "the church stands and falls": justification. While in both the Hebrew and Greek biblical antecedent languages, there is a linguistic relationship between justice and words related to God's justifying work in Jesus' cross and resurrection, the question remaining before us is this: What also do those who are justified have to contribute to a world of evil, falsehood, baseness, and ugliness?

As someone who works in Christian higher education (and also resides on a college campus), I have observed many younger members within these faith traditions be attracted to a range of activism—from marching in pro-life events to kneeling in Black Lives Matter protests. They do not begrudge assertions of doctrine or verbal apologetics, but their raised sense of global responsibility hears theology as a prompt for action. Perhaps their consciences are accused (Rom. 2:15) due to the ease of transportation that enables them to see more. Perhaps it's due to increased access to communication technology and social media. Whatever the factors, their awareness of the plight of those who suffer and the possibilities for making a difference is raised. Theirs is a push toward a *martyria* that aims to make meaningful, tangible contributions to God's world precisely because they know themselves to be God's.

DRENCHED FOR JUST THIS

Contributive justice is rooted in the gifts all Christians are given in their baptisms: the justifying justice of God in Jesus Christ flowing through the threefold name at the font, fueling through the word the daily actions of those who do justice. "A Christian life is nothing else than

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a daily baptism, begun once and continuing ever after.”⁵ The ripple effect of rising daily to a new life in Christ produces a wave of righteousness that drowns the enemies of God’s justice with Spirit-led actions, which are both aware of sin, including the sin of self-justifying behavior, at the same time that compassion is enacted. Just as water cannot be contained, neither can God’s love in Christ Jesus.

Since contributive justice is not an ideology or a social justice platform, but a process rooted in realism about the human condition, it is not as prone to the sort of pride or absolutism that “deflects attention from the extrinsic righteousness of Christ to one’s own spiritual and moral efforts.”⁶ 

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IN SUMMARY, CONTRIBUTIVE JUSTICE . . .

... is not a duty embedded deontologically in ideas of ethical obligation or even noblesse oblige, but a responsibility in the sense of responsiveness to God’s mercy;

... is not based on what others deserve, embedded in human rights or even primarily for Christians in the inalienable rights of people living in poverty and marginalization, but is a signature of the baptized as they lavishly splash God’s love on all life, all lives, and all things living; it is real action for real people, complex and concrete;

... takes sin seriously—both in society and in individuals, both among those who perpetuate injustice and among those who work to remediate it;

... is built on the groundwork that everyone, including the suffering and the aggrieved, as well as the activist and the responder, possesses the potential to be part of the problem and part of the solution—everyone contributes;

... begins by assessing, affirming, mapping, and cultivating the assets, gifts, resources, networks, and knowledge that are already available;

... identifies the root cause of socioeconomic poverty and disparity as due primarily to a lack of access to networks or education, technology, training, support—not first as the result of moral failure (as some social conservatives claim) or of structural oppression (as is claimed by progressives);

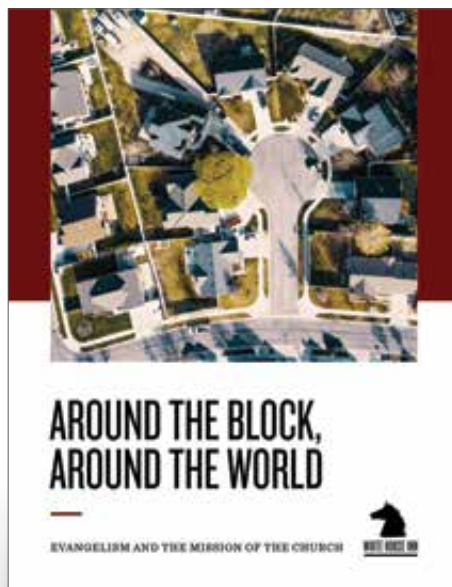
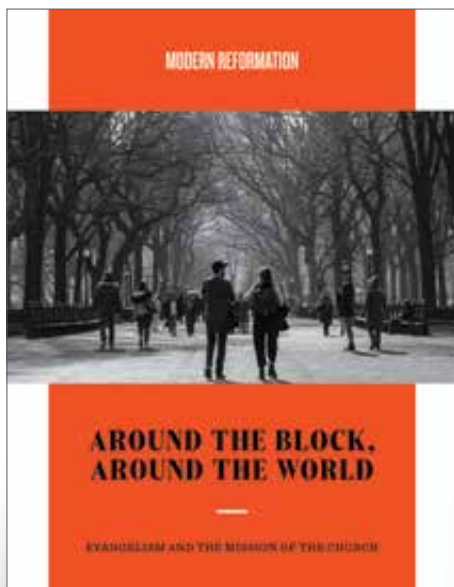
... aligns with the Reformers’ (Luther’s and Calvin’s) positive approach to Christian ethics as not only the avoidance of evil, but as the intentional pursuit of its obverse, the good, which correlates to that which is the opposite of the specific evil. For example, to commit murder is not only to kill but *not* to defend life. As one catechism puts it, Christians are guilty “not only when we do evil, but also when we have the opportunity to do good . . . but fail to do so.”⁷

1. Johann Gottfried Seume (1763–1810), in *Complete Works of W. H. Auden, vol. 3, Prose: 1949–1955* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 157.
2. In *Doing Christian Ethics from the Margins* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2004), Miguel De La Torre notes a fatigue with the topic: “Justice has become a worn-out, hollow expression—an abstract and detached battle cry. Every political action initiated by the dominant culture, no matter how self-serving, is construed as just” (8). A related problem regarding pursuits of justice has to do with those at opposite poles who either justify their actions in pursuit of innocence or who seek blood in pursuit of vindication. Derek Walcott points to this as a fact of colonialism: “Who, in the depth of conscience, is not silently screaming for pardon or for revenge? The pulse of New World history is the racing pulse beat of fear, the tiring cycles of stupidity and greed.” In “The Muse of History,” *What the Twilight Says* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998), 39.
3. “Not by understanding, reading, and speculating.” Luther on Psalm 5, *Weimer Ausgabe* 5:183.
4. See Philip Melancthon, *Loci Communes of 1543*, trans. J. A. O. Preus (St. Louis: Concordia, 1992), 70–72.
5. Martin Luther, “Large Catechism,” *The Book of Concord*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 465.
6. Richard John Neuhaus, “On Loving the Law of God,” *First Things* (February 2009).
7. Luther, “Large Catechism,” 412.

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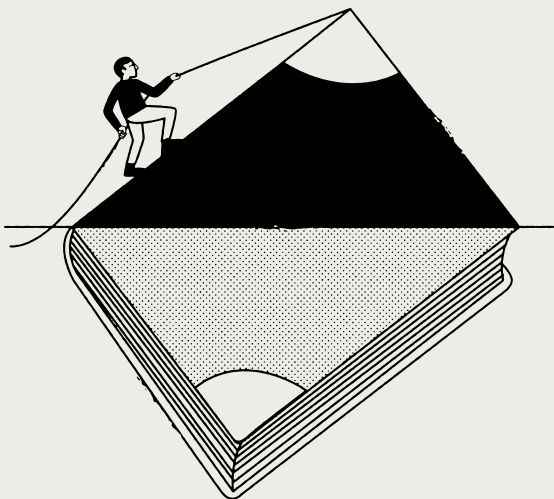
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Protestants and American Conservatism: A Short History

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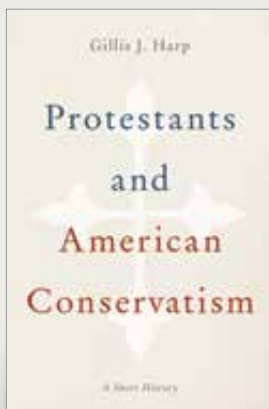
Oxford University Press, 2019

323 pages (hardback), \$34.95

S

ince about the time when Jerry Falwell Sr. founded the Moral Majority in 1979 (with lots of help from Republican Party operatives), confessional and evangelical

Protestants have generally identified as conservative. In Christian terms, being conservative meant at least belief in the supernatural character of biblical religion, as well as trust in the Bible as the word of God. In political categories, being conservative meant being pro-life, affirming the importance of the family, a strong national defense (especially in the Cold War context of America's opposition to Soviet Communism), and also small or limited government. How any of those convictions cohered, from the big government needed to contain Communism to the limited government of the Constitution, or from the personal freedoms enshrined in the Bill of Rights to support for legislation to restrain immorality (such as prohibitions on heterosexual sex outside marriage and homosexual sex within it), was always a mystery. In election seasons, candidates and spokespersons for the Religious Right rarely connected the dots between faith and politics. Most Americans, on the Left and the Right, sensed that support for Republican candidates was normal for serious Christians and anyone who wanted to preserve America's political norms. In effect, to be a conservative Christian was to be a political conservative (and please don't ask if Republicans are truly conservative, thank you).



Compounding the unasked questions surrounding Christianity and American conservatism was a general ignorance about the history of political conservatism in the United States. After World War II, a conservative movement emerged out of frustration with the East Coast elite sensibilities of the old Republican Party. William F. Buckley Jr. was a huge figure in cultivating a constituency that was responsible (mainly) for transforming the Republican Party and channeling conservative energies into the presidency of Ronald Reagan. On the way to that major accomplishment in American political history, movement conservatives lingered on the fringes. Lyndon B. Johnson's staggering defeat in 1964 of presidential candidate Barry Goldwater, the ideal conservative for many in the movement, was an early indication that both the country and even the Republican Party itself were not ready for the conservatism that Buckley had constructed. But through a variety

of institutions—especially magazines and think tanks—conservatives won many public debates and even some policy controversies to put one of their own in the White House.

Where were evangelicals and Protestant fellow travelers in this conservative history? That is not the question that Gillis J. Harp attempts to answer in his careful and comprehensive book. But *Protestants and American Conservatism* is necessary for anyone who wants to find an answer to the riddles surrounding Protestantism and political conservatism. At the

same time, the book (like so many other histories of American conservatism, such as Russell Kirk's *The Conservative Mind* or George Nash's *The Conservative Intellectual Movement*) has an artificial quality, thanks to the necessity of defining conservatism and then identifying

figures in the past who held to the specified set of ideas or policies. The study of history generally involves starting with the stories of persons, institutions, and policy debates before defining a position that unites what might seem like a disparate set of episodes. The reality is that modern conservatism is a movement that begins only in the 1950s (with books like Kirk's or Buckley's magazine *The National Review*). Any long-term history of conservatism before then is really a construction, looking for similarities among a host of figures or events that may have been disconnected in their own time or that have no direct relationship from one generation to the next. Despite this problem (which afflicts all histories of American conservatism), Harp has produced a smart and well-argued book on the history of Protestants' place in American national politics.

The author's narrative conventionally follows the stages of American political history and sorts out where Protestants stood within the major political developments of each period, from the colonial era and the founding, through debates over slavery and the union, capitalism and progressivism, and finally the World Wars and the Cold War. Most of the figures Harp includes before the twentieth century will likely be unfamiliar to conservative Protestants, who may venture into the world of conservatism through media personalities such as Rush Limbaugh or Ben Shapiro, but some (like Princeton theologians Charles Hodge or Benjamin Warfield) will be. But the bulk of voices prior to the fundamentalist controversy or the rise of evangelicalism will prompt readers to reach for their smartphones and open a search engine. In fact, the late nineteenth century's debates about a modernizing society featured a variety of Protestant academics, many at Yale and Princeton, who were critical of progressivism (expanding government power to respond to social and economic upheaval), but who did not respond in the contemporary fashion that celebrates small government. These conservative

The reality is that modern conservatism is a movement that begins only in the 1950s. . . . Any long-term history of conservatism before then is really a construction.

Protestants also worried about corporate capitalism and the consequences of materialism for Americans' character, while working within and hoping to bolster the existing structures of both government and civil society. Throughout much of this history, Harp detects the common conservative commitments to established social order, "defined customary hierarchies," reluctance about rebellion, the organic character of society, the positive role of the state in moral order, and the importance of mediating institutions (families, schools, churches, and voluntary associations).

For readers particularly curious about evangelicalism and the Religious Right, Harp is

equally instructive. Evangelicals were distant from the rise of the 1950s conservative movement and only joined actively into Republican electoral politics during the run-up to Reagan's election. Harp is also astute about the thinness of evangelical political theory that imitated the conservative mantra about preserving liberty from big government and the exceptional character of the United States in spreading freedom around the world. Indeed, the chapter on "The Success and Failure of the Religious Right" may well be worth the price of the book, since it situates everyone from Falwell and Francis Schaeffer to Marvin Olasky and Cal Thomas in the context of a much broader history of both Protestantism and American politics.

The one opportunity Harp missed in this otherwise important book was an assessment of Protestantism's relationship to modernity. Recent years have seen many Roman Catholic academics (e.g., Brad Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society*, and Patrick Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed*) attribute to the Reformation and its political consequences

much of the moral and social debris that today's social conservatives lament about modern society. By overturning received institutions (political and religious), the argument goes, Protestantism unleashed a society that promotes liberty at all costs, disregards order, and maybe even dismisses received truths. One reason Harp may have failed to address this critique of Protestantism was his decision to devote the conclusion to evangelicals and Donald Trump. Quite naturally, his book shows how anomalous that support in the 2016 election was and how far removed it is from earlier forms of Protestant political conservatism. At the same time, he could well have used this book to explain that Protestantism, for as many novelties it introduced in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, retained its own political and theological ideas for maintaining order, the rule of law, and respect for authority. Even without entering into this debate, Harp's book is as timely as it is thoughtful. 

D. G. HART teaches history at Hillsdale College and is the Novakovic Fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute.

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The Mosaic of Atonement: An Integrated Approach to Christ's Work

By Joshua M. McNall

Zondervan Academic, 2019

336 pages (paperback), \$34.99

The Christian teaching that God has reconciled sinners by Christ through the Spirit has been central and pervasive in the worship, contemplation, discussions, and debates of every generation of the church age. This is certainly true of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Thus to say that the last hundred and fifty years has seen an abundance of publications on the subject of the atonement is not to say that such an abundance is exceptional.

What is exceptional about the twentieth-century discussions of the atonement, however, are the general *categories* within which those discussions have taken place. The late-nineteenth to mid-twentieth-centuries debates were dominated by appeals to and explanations of “models” and “theories” of the atonement, which were supposedly developed and articulated in various historical epochs. The late twentieth century witnessed various reactions to what was seen as the biblical and philosophical inadequacy, and historical relativity, of these various models and theories.

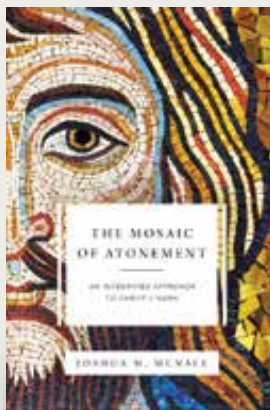
Over the past fifty years or so, the problematic nature of these nineteenth- and twentieth-centuries debates has become apparent. Retrieval movements in historical theology, the theological interpretation of Scripture, as well as a renewal of dogmatic interests have all contributed to dissatisfaction with the “models” and “theories” approach to the atonement. Some argue that

it is best to drop the categories entirely. Others, however, see some utility in retaining them, so long as they are clearly defined and holistically appropriated.

Joshua McNall, in his *Mosaic of the Atonement*, prefers the latter. He argues that the “models, metaphors, and motifs” used by Christian thinkers down through the ages to “articulate the meaning of redemption” ought to be understood as “pieces” that can be fitted together (14). As the title suggests, the dominant metaphor of the book is that of a mosaic: “Unlike a photograph, whose tiny pixels present a seamless blend of color and shape, both puzzles and mosaics show us *how* the pieces fit together while also allowing each piece to retain a recognizable particularity” (21). According to McNall, when the four main models of atonement used throughout Christian history—recapitulation, penal substitution, *Christus Victor*, and moral influence—are pieced together, they reveal “a more holistic picture of Christ’s work” (74).

McNall argues that recapitulation, originally developed by Irenaeus of Lyon in the second century, “should be seen as a foundation” of the other models in that they “stand, both logically and biblically, upon ideas inherent within the view of Jesus as the true and faithful Adam and the true and faithful Israel” (75). Recapitulation provides “foundational presuppositions upon which [the other models] stand” (81). Christ’s substitution and victory and the Spirit-wrought moral transformation of those who are united to Christ presuppose the reality of the overarching biblical storyline: in Adam all have sinned; in Christ all are made righteous.

Penal substitution is, in McNall’s terms, “the hub—or beating *heart*—of this mosaic of Christ. It is propped up by the incorporative



presuppositions of recapitulation (the Adamic *feet*), while supplying lifeblood to the outstretched *arms* (moral influence)” (173). It also, and importantly, relates to *Christus Victor* by explaining *how* God in Christ triumphs over sin, death, and the devil. His defense of penal substitution is one to be reckoned with, carefully ranging over the historical (ch. 4) and biblical (ch. 5) evidence, and then responding to the full range of contemporary (though not new) critiques of this model (ch. 6). Interestingly, McNall even defends what has long been considered an outmoded atonement motif. “Christ overcomes sin, death, and the devil not just by recapitulative obedience . . . and penal substitution . . . but also by leveraging satanic ignorance and self-deception against the very monster that would orchestrate his plunge into the great abyss of his own choosing” (228).

Atonement, McNall argues in part IV, “is praxis” and therefore “Christians are to embody atonement” (296–97). This is where the moral influence model comes into view. Recalling Irenaeus again, he suggests that those who have been, and are being, morally transformed by the Spirit are “leveraged for the ministry of reconciliation” where “new

creation once again emerges out of chaos.” This aspect of atonement, then, relates to the telos of atonement, *Christus Victor*, as both the Spirit-wrought effect of the “already” of Christ’s victory and the Spirit-wrought means to bring about the “not yet.”

It is impossible in this brief review to detail all that is helpful in McNall’s book. So, let me highlight a few that I found especially so. In the first place, this project should be classified in the broad stream of theological retrieval. McNall very helpfully engages both Scripture and the historical interpretation of it, ranging widely and diving deeply in that engagement. His treatment does not come across as deconstructive or iconoclastic on the one hand, or as parroting (one particular version) of the tradition on the other. Rather, it reads as a serious engagement in the search for understanding.

Second, his treatment of penal substitution, while again bold and forthright, is helpfully balanced. Without coming across as uncomfortable with the notion of punishment or substitution, he deftly underscores the important theological principle of proportion: Penal substitution is *not* the doctrine of atonement, but an important part

Recalling Irenaeus . . . he suggests that those who have been, and are being, morally transformed by the Spirit are “leveraged for the ministry of reconciliation” where “new creation once again emerges out of chaos.”

of it, a part that needs to be correlated with its other constituent parts if the mosaic of atonement is to be seen clearly.

Third, he helpfully integrates the New Testament theme of inaugurated eschatology with the doctrine of atonement: triumph, he says, is “the telos of atonement” (230). It is this telos that links *Christus Victor* to moral influence, because the victory comes in “stages”; and human testimony, a “suffering and sometimes stumbling obedience” (231), constitutes a part of God’s staged victory.

Finally, with respect to moral influence, McNall emphatically argues in chapter 13 that the influence is a work of the Spirit; it is not to be considered merely in psychological terms—for example, how a good story elicits psychological change in its reader. It is a Spirit-wrought transformation of disordered loves.

There are a good many interesting parts to this work as well: his defense of “a long-discarded element of atonement doctrine, the place of deception in the devil’s defeat” (ch. 8); his correlated and lengthy discussions of the historicity of Adam (ch. 2) and the ontic status of Satan (ch. 9); and his critical appropriation of Abelard and René Girard as “the positive and negative gestures of moral influence thinking” that make up “a crucial facet of atonement doctrine proper” (287), just to name a few. I’ll leave it to the reader to more fully pursue these interests.

There are a few places where I think the book is unsuccessful. McNall aims to steer between hierarchizing the models on the one hand and leaving them as disconnected and relativized on the other. Though he successfully avoids allowing one piece to swallow the others, even his metaphor of a mosaic requires that the pieces be put together in accordance with some logic. The logic, perhaps, does not *evaluate*; but it does *order* and orders entail hierarchy. (This is *not* a bad thing!) What McNall wishes to avoid, it seems to me, is *disproportion* of one model to the others. He has done this, but in so doing he has not avoided hierarchizing the models.

I remain unconvinced that attempting to integrate various “models” of the atonement is the best approach to constructing a doctrine of atonement.

Second, placing moral influence, especially Spirit-wrought moral influence, under the category of atonement is rather to misplace it. The traditional reformed category of sanctification—as the application of the work of Christ by the work of the Spirit in the life of the believer—seems to this reviewer a much better fit. In this case, perhaps the book would be better titled *The Mosaic of Salvation*.

Third, and most importantly, I remain unconvinced that attempting to integrate various “models” of the atonement is the best approach to constructing a doctrine of atonement, much less that it is a helpful way to approach the history of Christian thought on the work of Christ. Better, I think, is a series of ordered, interrelated questions that engage exegetical, philosophical, traditional, and ethical considerations that proportionately shape and fill out the doctrine.

Nevertheless, it is difficult to think of a contemporary work comparable to this one. It is accessible yet thorough, ranging over

biblical and historical studies and contemporary debates, all the while piecing together a compelling and integrated portrait of the work of Christ. For those interested in an accessible and thorough study of the work of Christ, this book is a good place to start. **MR**

JOSHUA SCHENDEL is the new executive editor of *Modern Reformation* magazine.

Created to Draw Near: Our Life as God's Royal Priests

By Edward T. Welch

Crossway, 2019

224 pages (paperback), \$17.99

Y

ears ago in Philadelphia, I watched a woman stand paralyzed and in tears on the platform of the subway station.

She needed to get on the train, but she was gripped by fear. As several people came over to try to calm her hysterics, it became clear what exactly she was afraid of: falling into the gap between the platform and the train. The fear was, of course, irrational. The space between the two was maybe three inches wide. How her terror would vanish if she could simply understand that.

Admittedly, I have had similar fears, and I suspect you have as well. We are pilgrims on the way, journeying from earth to heaven. Haven't you ever felt paralyzed on this "side" as you fear what will happen if you try to cross over to the other? Like that poor woman in Philly, we don't realize that the gap really isn't that vast after all. "The distance between heaven and earth has

always been shorter than we expected" (206–7). This is author Edward T. Welch's observation in his latest book *Created to Draw Near: Our Life as God's Royal Priests*. Welch reveals to us the purpose for which we were created: communion with God. God has made us to desire fellowship with him, yet all too often we think it is an unattainable reality. This book sweeps away that fear and instead offers gospel comfort by reclaiming the doctrine of the universal priesthood of believers: a doctrine that teaches us that God is closer to us than we think.

The priesthood of believers was an essential component of the Reformation. Indeed, it was Luther's conviction that believers themselves, without priestly intercession, could and should approach God that convinced him to depart from the Roman Catholic Mass. Centuries later, Welch perceptively recognizes this is a timely issue once again. Today, we are more isolated than ever. With faces buried in our devices and

the world shut out by our headphones, it would seem we enjoy the solitude. But the reality is that people are desperate for communion and fellowship. Welch begins his book by acknowledging that this independent and isolating streak runs deep, but "our desire for closeness runs deeper" (13). And our desire, above all, is to be close to God. We can cure our twenty-first-century loneliness when we live out our identity as priests to God.

To help us to this end, Welch unpacks the biblical conception of priesthood in a threefold manner: exploring

the office as it is presented in Eden, Israel, and Christ. In these first two sections especially, I was pleasantly surprised to encounter a new side to Welch's writing. This book brings more of his gentle and accessible style that the Christian public has come to expect over the past decades,



“His descent confirms his promise to come near to his people. He did not wait for us to come up to him. He descended to us in gentleness and humility. We have no reason to be afraid but every reason to come.”

establishing himself as a gifted counselor and practitioner of the soul. But in this work, he proves to be a capable biblical theologian as well.

Created to Draw Near is an accessible introduction to a whole host of biblical themes and concepts, including the Old Testament sacrificial system, feast days, and Israelite liturgical life. Biblical episodes and characters I had not previously connected to the priesthood I now see in a new light, thanks to Welch's insightful scholarship (the life and times of Jacob is one example). Likewise, familiar theological concepts receive a fresh framing when viewed through the lens of the priesthood: sanctification becomes “progressive nearness” (110); as Christians, we are becoming more and more conformed to Christ, which is to say we are becoming closer and closer to God.

Ample space, and rightfully so, is taken up with reveling in Christ's role as our high priest. Understanding my role as priest necessitates understanding Christ's role: “When we consider our identity as priests, we are signing on to more deeply understand ‘Jesus died for my sins’” (155). It is sin that separates me from God. It is sin that alienates me and makes me alone

and an orphan. But it is Jesus and his sacrifice on the cross that brings me back to God's home, sets me at his table, and makes me his child forever. In Christ, God has come near to me to make me qualified to come near to him. “His descent confirms his promise to come near to his people. He did not wait for us to come up to him. He descended to us in gentleness and humility. We have no reason to be afraid but every reason to come” (149).

From this critical foundation, Welch concludes his study by drawing out explicitly in what ways we are to fulfill our role as royal priests in the world today. We are to “do battle” against sin (Welch helpfully focuses on this military aspect of the priesthood, which is often overlooked), discern the body of Christ by promoting her peace and unity, pray for the church and the world, and bless others. “The partner of prayer is blessing,” he writes. “We bless when we have heard the good words spoken in heaven and want to pass them on to those on earth” (194). Interestingly, a treatment of the more obvious priestly function of worship leader was absent. But our primary work as priests, which Welch emphasizes again and again, is simply to be near

God—"that is the mission of the priests" (14). What's not to like about that? Our primary calling is to enjoy God's presence!

One of the more fascinating priestly motifs that Welch traces out in his book is that of clothing. Adam failed as the first royal priest and forfeited his opportunity to receive a glorious robe of righteousness from God; sin entered the world and "royal investiture became a barely remembered dream" (46). But God will not let us forget why we were made and how we are to be dressed. One way God does this is through the priesthood in Israel, a line designated in part by their clothing. Welch makes the observation, appealing to Exodus 28 and the garments of Aaron, that the first word used to describe the priesthood is "beauty" (85). The beauty of the priest's clothing represented the people who belonged to a beautiful and glorious God. But the beauty and glory that belong to us as priests is marred by sin. Our hope, then, is ultimately in Jesus and his beauteous robes that clothe us. One thinks of the classic poem "Aaron" by George Herbert (1593–1633):

Holiness on the head,
Light and perfections on the breast,
Harmonious bells below, raising the dead
To lead them unto life and rest:
Thus are true Aarons drest.

Profaneness in my head,
Defects and darkness in my breast,
A noise of passions ringing me for dead
Unto a place where is no rest:
Poor priest, thus am I drest.

Only another head
I have, another heart and breast,
Another music, making live, not dead,
Without whom I could have no rest:
In him I am well drest.

Christ is my only head,
My alone-only heart and breast,
My only music, striking me ev'n dead,
That to the old man I may rest,
And be in him new-drest.

So, holy in my head,
Perfect and light in my dear breast,
My doctrine tun'd by Christ (who is not
dead,
But lives in me while I do rest),
Come people; Aaron's drest.

In *Created to Draw Near*, we are reminded that we live at the intersection of heaven and earth (23). Indeed, we have a gap before us, and we need to be mindful of it. But that gap between us and God is not as vast as you might think. Thanks to the atoning work of our great high priest, the chasm caused by sin can now be crossed with a single step of faith. For when you have Jesus Christ, God promises to "unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth" (Eph. 1:10). ■

JONATHAN LANDRY CRUSE is the pastor of Community Presbyterian Church in Kalamazoo, Michigan. He is a hymn writer whose works can be found at www.HymnsOfDevotion.com.

**The beauty of
the priest's clothing
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glorious God.**



TELL US YOUR STORY.

What have *White Horse Inn* and *Modern Reformation* meant to you, your family, or your church?
Your stories encourage us in our work, and we'd love to hear them.

Introducing Our New Executive Editor



by Eric Landry

As we near our thirtieth year of publication, we have been searching for someone to take the reins of *Modern Reformation*. After an extensive search process, I am pleased to announce the selection of Dr. Joshua Schendel as the magazine's new executive editor.

Dr. Schendel recently received his PhD in theology from St. Louis University, where he completed his dissertation "A Learned Dispute among Friends': William Twisse and John Owen on the Necessity of the Christ's Satisfaction." He also holds an MA from Westminster Seminary California and a BA in philosophy and Latin from Calvin College. In addition to his academic work, Joshua is pursuing ordination in the Presbyterian Church in America, has written regularly for the online magazine *Conciliar Post*, and has even run his own carpentry business! He and his wife, Bethanne, have three children.

Joshua is the first full-time executive editor in the magazine's history, which reflects a renewed commitment by the board of directors to ensure that *Modern Reformation* is the must-read magazine for thinking Christians. After nearly twenty years working for the magazine (first as

a production assistant, then as managing editor, followed by two stints as executive editor, and now as editorial director), I am excited for its future under Joshua's leadership.

Modern Reformation has always existed in an in-between place—not quite a popular magazine and not quite an academic journal—appealing to thoughtful Christians who have more than a casual interest in theology.

By God's grace and under the capable leadership of Dr. Schendel, the vision that first launched *Modern Reformation* as a newsletter (produced in Michael Horton's college dorm room!) will continue to shape its future. This will also now include an active, engaging online presence with a revamped and rebranded website, as well as an exciting new initiative: "*Modern Reformation Weekends*"! These teaching and thinking retreats (we plan to offer the first one this fall) will enable participants to dive into topics we discuss in our pages. These weekends will feature Michael Horton and others, who can help us shape the way we engage with the world around us. Stay tuned for more details! **MR**

ERIC LANDRY is the editorial director of *Modern Reformation*.

"After narrowing down the short-list to some really extraordinary applicants, Joshua Schendel stood out to all of us as the ideal executive editor for MR. Besides his thorough education and varied passions, Joshua knows MR well and has a bold vision for taking it to the next level. His interests lie not only in theology but also in literature. As I focus much of my attention now on the relaunch of MR and the weekends around it, I'm already enthusiastic about working with Joshua."

—**Michael Horton**, Editor-in-Chief



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