

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

## Justice in the Bible

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*This is the fourth and final article in the series on justice and race by Dr. Timothy Keller that includes: "[The Bible and Race](#)" (March 2020), "[The Sin of Racism](#)" (June 2020), and "[A Biblical Critique of Secular Justice and Critical Theory](#)" (August 2020).*

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**Introductory note:** In a previous article I argued that all the secular political options and justice theories, from “right” to “left”—Libertarianism, Liberalism, Utilitarianism, Progressivism—are grounded in reductionistic worldviews.<sup>1</sup> Christians should not ignore any of the rightful concerns that they raise, but also should not wholly align themselves with any of them. Only biblical justice is comprehensive enough to address the needs of the human condition. In this article, I lay out in greater detail what biblical justice is. (Note: My essay assumes the abiding relevance of the Old Testament,<sup>2</sup> the

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<sup>1</sup> **Other critiques of secular ideologies.** I am not saying that any of these ideologies or theories are themselves fully coherent “worldviews” (see footnote 3 below). However, they do rest on elements of worldview, that are, on underlying accounts of human nature (individualistic or collectivistic) of epistemology—how we know truth—and of ethics that leave out the existence of God. And as a result they all have severe weaknesses. My critiques of these secular justice theories are deliberately short and somewhat over-simplified for pedagogical purposes. For more thorough critiques of Libertarianism and Utilitarianism, see Robert Bellah, *et al*, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life, With a New Preface*, University of California, 2007. For a critique of Liberalism see Patrick Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed*, Yale, 2019 and Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*, University of Chicago, 1966. For a critique of the secular, individualistic “social contract theory” of government on which Libertarianism and Liberalism rely, see Nancy Pearcey, *Total Truth: Liberating Christianity from its Cultural Captivity*, Crossway, 2004, 138-140; 279-283. For a critique of all the more political manifestations of these secular justice theories, see David T. Koyzis, *Political Visions and Illusions: A Survey and Critique of Contemporary Ideologies*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, IVP, 2019. For a critique of Marxism and its progressive derivatives, see Carlo Lancellotti, “The Dead End of the Left? Augusto Del Noce’s Critique of Modern Politics”, in *Commonweal*, April 16, 2018 as well as Augusto Del Noce, *The Crisis of Modernity*. McGill-Queens University, 2014. For a fascinating look at the problems that Marxism and its successors have with morality and its inherent relativism, see Steven Lukes, *Marxism and Morality*, Oxford, 1985. Lukes is quite sympathetic to Marxism, but he is ruthlessly candid about the problems posed by Marxism’s insistence that everything—even morality—is structural, the product of social forces. If there is no morality apart from that produced by social structure, how can we ever judge that one structure is more “unjust” or immoral than another?

<sup>2</sup> **How the Old Testament contributes to Christian ethics.** There is both a substantial older theological tradition as well as much newer biblical scholarship holding that the ethical teaching of the Old Testament has abiding validity for Christians. Both the Anglican Church’s *Thirty-Nine Articles* (Article VII) and the reformed *Westminster Confession of Faith* (Chapter 19) divide the Old Testament law into three

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categories—the moral, the ceremonial, and the civil or judicial law. The WCF teaches that the moral law (e.g. Ten Commandments) is still binding on the Christian, citing Romans 13:8-10, 1 John 2:3-4,7. Then it shows that the ceremonial law (e.g. sacrifices, clean laws) having to do with the tabernacle and temple worship are fulfilled in Christ and “now abrogated” for the Christian. Finally, it speaks of the civil or judicial laws (e.g. laws of gleaning, sabbath years) in which the moral laws were applied to Israel through regulations of its national commerce, agriculture, government, and jurisprudence. The Confession says that these laws were given to Israel “as a body politic, which expired together with the State of that people” (WCF 19:4). This does not mean that the Jewish people no longer exist, but that the specific social-political form—a monarchy using the Mosaic Law as its constitution—is no more. The Confession concludes that these laws are also “not obliging any other now” but then adds with remarkable nuance, “further than the *general equity* thereof may require.” That is, while the details of the civil law are not binding on us, yet there are principles of “equity” and justice these laws reflect that Christians may not ignore, because they are rooted in the moral law. At this point the WCF cites New Testament passages where Paul quotes a civil law of Israel and then applies the principle behind the law to Christians. For example, in 1 Corinthians 9:8-10 Paul quotes Deuteronomy 25:4 (“Don’t muzzle the ox as it is treading out the corn”). Landowners muzzling an ox that was treading on the corn were forbidding the ox to eat any of the profits that the animal was producing. The Mosaic Law identified that as cruel and ungenerous. Paul then applied this same basic principle to humans, in that ministers who were evangelizing and gathering new churches should be supported out of the gifts of these new communities they had produced. Another example of the New Testament use of the Old Testament civil law is 2 Corinthians 8:13-15. Paul cites Exodus 16:18, the rule that no one should gather more manna than anyone else, and applies this to how Christians should give sacrificially to those in need “that there be equality.” So the Westminster Confession teaches that Christians should identify the general principles of justice we find in the Old Testament civil law and find ways to apply them in our own time and place. Over the last fifty years a consensus has developed among orthodox and conservative biblical scholars across many denominations and traditions that the civil and judicial laws of the Old Testament reflect principles of justice and that we must find ways of embodying them in our own times and places. See Walter Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics*, Zondervan, 1983 and Christopher J.H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*, InterVarsity Press, 2004. See also William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg,, and Roberts Hubbard, Jr, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 3rd ed., Zondervan, 2017, 443-451. Klein *et al* write that in the Old Testament law “its principles should find some application in all cultures” and that we should look for “transcultural values.” For a full-volume application of this idea, see Craig Blomberg, “*Neither Riches Nor Poverty*” *A Biblical Theology of Possessions*, IVP, 1999.

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antithesis between Christian and all non-Christian worldviews,<sup>3</sup> and yet the doctrine of common grace.<sup>4</sup> For readers who disagree or who want to explore these topics at greater length, see the footnotes in the previous sentence.)

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<sup>3</sup> **Is there a Christian Worldview? Yes.** Over the past century the concept of a Christian “worldview” has developed. The word was taken from Immanuel Kant but given new meaning by its early proponents, especially Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck. They argued first, that human beings cannot live without assuming some answers to the abiding questions—Who am I? What is my purpose in life? What’s wrong with people and how do we put it right? How should I live and how do I determine right or wrong? And how do I know that what I know about these things is the truth?—Answers to these questions constitute a worldview, a mental map, through which we process daily life. Most of us simply adopt and assume the worldview of our family or community and culture, but others think it out. No one can live without one. Secondly, these early proponents argued that Christianity is not merely a set of individual doctrines to believe, but a coherent, comprehensive way of answering all these basic life questions and therefore it is a way for looking at every area of life from a Christian perspective. Because Christianity’s view of reality is grounded in the Triune God, a belief shared with no other religion or philosophy, its worldview is necessarily unique and radically distinct from all others.

Over the last several decades, the term “worldview” has been adopted by many speakers who use it in different ways. Perhaps the dominant way to present the concept has been to describe Christianity as a set of bullet point beliefs, and then to compare it with the parallel beliefs of other accounts of reality, often broken out into discrete categories such as secularism, scientific materialism, postmodernism, existentialism, nihilism, New Age spirituality, Marxism—and sometimes adding other religions such as Buddhism and Islam. The six editions of James Sire’s *The Universe Next Door: A Basic Worldview Catalogue* and Jeff Myers’ *Understanding the Times: A Survey of Competing Worldviews* are examples of this approach. Strong criticism has been levelled at these kinds of books. First, it is charged, the worldview categories overlap. For example, arguably, materialism, postmodernism, Marxism, existentialism and New Age Spirituality are all forms of secularism—they are all approaches taking place within what Charles Taylor calls the secular “immanent frame.” Secondly, individuals in our culture increasingly mix together elements from more than one of these categories. Many younger adults today often mix therapeutic, individualistic answers to the identity question with Marxist, collectivistic answers to the question of justice. And this is also true of so-called “schools of thought.” Is it fair, for example, to call Critical Race Theory a well-structured “worldview?” No. It, too, is something of a mishmash of ideas from older Marxism and newer postmodernism. All this has led many to propose that the term “worldview” be retired.

However, Herman Bavinck’s 1913 essay *Christian Worldview* (Crossway, 2019) has recently been translated from Dutch into English for the first time. This is a seminal document—some argue it is one of the first substantial articulations of the idea. Bavinck wants to compare Christianity to the alternate worldviews that were developing in the secularizing western culture. (1) First, he begins with a statement that “Christianity stands antithetically to all that is brought before the market today...If we understand Christianity’s warrant and maintain a desire to preserve her essence, then we can do nothing else but take a resolute position against the systems of the day and the worldviews of its own invention and fashioning....There can be no thought of reconciliation between Christianity and [other worldviews].” (27) (2) Second, Bavinck shows that each non-Christian worldview starts by assuming realities about the world and human nature that it cannot prove. So it begins with acts of faith, not with empirical

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experience or objective reason (34). (3) Third, Bavinck says that secular non-Christian worldviews are reductionistic or “mechanical.” They seek to explain everything by some single factor (80-81). So scientific materialism reduces everything to the physical (e.g. love is just a chemical brain event that helps you pass on your genes) while pantheism says the physical world is an illusion and reduces everything to the spiritual. This reductionism means every non-Christian worldview creates an idol. It looks to some created thing rather than God to be the key or the solution or the salvation (It also demonizes some created thing rather than human sin to be the main problem with the world). (4) Fourth, the inevitable simplistic one-sidedness of these worldviews leaves each of them, in different ways, unable to account for what we know both intellectually and intuitively about the complexity of the world and of humanity, which is both created and fallen, both physical and spiritual, both individual and social. “Christianity is the only religion whose view of the world and life *fits* the world and life” (28, italics are mine). Only the Christian worldview can keep “heart and head together.” (5) Fifth, every alternative worldview fails on its own terms to give what it promises—a knowledge of truth, a stable identity, and a basis for moral norms. Without the Trinity at their foundation, modern worldviews fall into opposite “ditches.” For example, they fall into empiricism or rationalism—both of which, in the end, must confess that there is no way for us to know truth, and yet we know intuitively that truth exists and we can’t live without it. This means non-Christian worldviews are unliveable. They fail to give us solid resources for finding our identity, experiencing freedom, knowing satisfaction, having a basis for doing justice, or discovering truth. (6) Finally, by showing how Christianity has a unique answer to all these perennial questions, he makes the case that Christianity is a complete worldview, giving us unique perspectives on every aspect of life, not just private life, but on business, law, politics, science, art, and government. Christianity is not only for helping us in our private life. It is a way of seeing, living, and working distinctively in all of life.

Most importantly, Bavinck avoids the pitfalls of more recent worldview writing. He does not artificially divide people into discrete worldview categories. Instead, Bavinck goes down to the basic, perennial philosophical debates and issues—the ‘deep structures of culture’—of epistemology (how do we know?), anthropology (what is human nature, what is wrong with it, and how can it be repaired?), ethics (what is justice? how do we determine right from wrong?), metaphysics (what is real?), teleology (what is our purpose?), and eschatology (where are we going?). He shows that any particular school of thought—such as evolutionary naturalism or Critical Race Theory today—while not a comprehensive worldview *per se*, is necessarily assuming certain answers to these worldview questions.

Bavinck is the most helpful resource on this subject I’ve ever read, but while brief, it is challenging. Two other somewhat more accessible resources are recommended because they take Bavinck’s pedagogical and theological approach. They provide the critical tools of the doctrines of creation, fall, redemption, and restoration, by which Christianity can interact with any individual, whatever their particular worldview. Two of those works are Nancy Pearcey, *Total Truth: Liberating Christianity*, Crossway, 2004 and Al Wolters, *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview*, Eerdmans, 2005.

<sup>4</sup> **The importance of common grace.** The doctrine of “common grace” is widely acknowledged as a teaching of the Bible. The idea is that God bestows gifts of wisdom, moral insight, goodness, and beauty across the human race, regardless of religious belief. Isaiah 45:1 speaks of Cyrus, a pagan king, who God anoints and uses for world leadership. Isaiah 28:23-29 tells us that when a farmer is fruitful, it is God who has been teaching him to be so. Romans 1 and 2 confirm that there is a primordial knowledge of God that all human beings have. In Romans 2:14,15 Paul says that God’s law is written on the heart of every human being—all people have an inward sense of morality, justice, love, the ‘golden rule’ and so on. All good and great artistic expressions, skillful farming, effective governments, and scientific advances are

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God's gifts to the human race (James 1:17). These gifts, however, are "common" in that they do not save the soul, yet, without them the world would be an intolerable place to live.

The obvious question is—how does "common grace" square with the idea that there is a sharp antithesis between Christianity and every other worldview? Romans 1:18ff. speaks to the question. The 'truth' about God is 'suppressed' (v.18) by every human being, and every non-Christian worldview helps in that suppression. However, the truth continues to bear down on us all. The NIV translates verse 20: "Since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities...have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so men are without excuse." But the verbs *nosumena* ("are being understood") and *kathopatai* ("are being seen") are in the form of present passive participles. The reality of God's nature and our obligations to him are not static, innate ideas or information. They are continually fresh, insistent pressures on the consciousness of every human being. This means that every non-Christian thinker is both fundamentally wrong *and yet* may say true things that they know despite, and inconsistently with, their worldview. The doctrine of sin means we Christians are not as wise or as right as our worldview should make us; the doctrine of common grace means non-believers are not as unwise as their wrong worldview should make them.

Calvin strikes the balance of the Reformed tradition when he writes about why we can learn from ancient Greek and Roman thinkers, despite their wrong worldviews. "Let that admirable light of truth shining in them teach us that the mind of man, though fallen and perverted from its wholeness, is nevertheless clothed and ornamented with God's excellent gifts. If we regard the Spirit of God as the sole fountain of truth, we shall neither reject the truth itself, nor despise it where it shall appear unless we wish to dishonor the Spirit of God....Those men whom Scripture (1 Corinthians 2:14) calls 'natural men' were, indeed, sharp and penetrating in their investigation of inferior things. Let us, accordingly, learn by their example how many gifts the Lord left to human nature even after it was despoiled of its true good" (*Institutes*, II. 2.15). Nevertheless, he also wrote that while it is true that... "in man's perverted and degenerate nature some sparks still gleam, [the light is nonetheless] choked with dense ignorance, so that it cannot come forth effectively. [His] mind, because of its dullness...betrays how incapable it is of seeking and finding truth" (*Institutes*, II. 2.12). How can Calvin write such a positive and then such a negative statement about pagan, polytheistic authors? Are non-believers capable of the truth or not? Yes and no. Calvin is just reading Romans 1 carefully. What Calvin says about ancient pagan authors would apply to modern thinkers. We can learn from anyone because of common grace, and we should be willing to humbly listen to non-Christian thinkers, because sin clouds our minds, too. For more on this subject, find the section on Common Grace in Louis Berkhof's *Systematic Theology*, see Herman Bavinck's article "Common Grace" on the internet, and see Richard Mouw, *He Shines in All That's Fair: Culture and Common Grace*, Eerdmans, 2001. Consider for a moment how the last footnote on Christian worldview relates to this footnote on common grace. To hold to both, strongly, not pitting them against each other, produces a stance toward the world that both appreciates non-believing thought and art while still recognizing and not compromising at all with the writer's fatally mistaken worldview. "Our first response to the great works of human culture...should be to celebrate them as reflections of God's own creativity. And even when we analyze where they go wrong, it should be in a spirit of love...[Francis] Schaeffer modeled this balance approach....He would appreciate the color and composition of an expressionist painting, or the technical quality of a Bergman film...even while identifying the relativistic or nihilistic worldview it expressed" (Pearcey, *Total Truth*, 56-57). That balance that led Nancy Pearcey to Christ at Schaeffer's L'Abri retreat is even rarer today than it was then.

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## 1. THE GOD OF JUSTICE

Biblical justice is not first of all a set of bullet points or a set of rules and guidelines. It is rooted in the very character of God and it is the outworking of that character, which is never less than just.

In his magisterial work on God's attributes, Herman Bavinck argues that in the Bible, God's justice is both retributive and reparative. It not only punishes evil-doing, but it restores those who are victims of injustice. Yet interestingly, "God's remunerative [restorative] justice is far more prominent in Scripture than his retributive justice."<sup>5</sup> God stands against "perverting the justice due the poor... slaying the innocent and righteous... accepting bribes.... oppressing the alien, the widow, and the orphan..." God "raises them to a position of honor and well-being... [D]oing justice with an eye to the needy becomes an act [also] of grace and mercy." And therefore, God's restorative justice "is not, like his anger, opposed to his steadfast love but is closely akin and synonymous with it." His justice is "simultaneously the manifestation of his grace (Psalm 97:11-12; 112:3-6; 116:5; 118:15-19)."<sup>6</sup>

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The Lord's justice is also retributive. He not only establishes justice for those who have been wronged and mistreated, but he also metes out punishment to those who have perpetrated those wrongs. He "does not spare the wicked" (Ezekiel 7:4, 9, 27; 8:18; 9:10).<sup>7</sup> As the Judge of all the earth, the Lord will finally give everyone what justice dictates is due to them (Acts 17:30-31). But he will also restore and "renew all things" so there is no more evil, suffering, or death (Matthew 19:28). Both his retributive and remunerative justice will come to final fulfillment at the end of history, and we will live in a new heavens and new earth filled with *dikaiosune* – justice (2 Peter 3:13).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Herman Bavinck, John Bolt, and John Vriend, *Reformed Dogmatics: God and Creation*, vol. 2 Baker Academic, 2004, 222.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 223-224.

<sup>7</sup> Scripture references are in the NIV translation unless indicated.

<sup>8</sup> **The theology of human rights.** Herman Bavinck shows that human rights are grounded in God's power as Creator and in his grace as Redeemer. God created the world so that everything has its own being and deserves treatment appropriate to its created nature. Human beings made in the image of God have

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## 2. THE FACETS OF JUSTICE

These basic themes work themselves out in four facets of biblical justice. Biblical justice is characterized by: radical generosity, universal equality, life-changing advocacy, and asymmetrical responsibility.

### GENEROSITY

The first facet of biblical justice is *radical generosity*. While secular individualism says that your money belongs to you, and socialism says your money belongs to the State, the Bible says that all your money belongs to God, who then entrusts it to you (1 Chronicles 29:14; 1 Corinthians 4:7). In Luke 16:1-16, Jesus calls us to be wise stewards of our wealth. A steward was the manager of an estate under its owner, making him both a master and yet a servant. So our wealth belongs to us and yet does not belong to us.

One place we see these two dimensions is in the Mosaic law itself. Theft is always an injustice, for to take someone's money or goods is to trample on their property rights. And yet many laws show us that these property rights are not absolute. The Sabbath year law required that every seventh year all debts were cancelled (Deuteronomy 15:7-10). An even more radical law was the law of the "Jubilee" year. Every 50 years, the land went back to its original allotments (Leviticus 25:8-55). On average, each person or family would have a once-in-a-lifetime chance to start over, no matter how deeply into debt they had fallen.

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rights to be treated as such. "By virtue of creation... 'rights' are structured into the very existence and nature of all existing things. Such rights have above all been accorded to rational creatures..." (*Reformed Dogmatics: God and Creation*, vol 2, 227). However, because of our sin, all our rights have been forfeited. "Though one must grant that in the nature of the case creatures can have no rights before God (Romans 11:35; 1 Corinthians 4:7), nor put him under an obligation...yet it is God himself who gives his creatures 'rights'...[for] when those rights have been forfeited by human sin, God makes a 'covenant of nature' with Noah and a 'covenant of grace' with Abraham, acts by which he again, out of sheer grace, grants to his creatures an array of rights and binds himself by an oath to maintain these rights..." (227). Bavinck is pointing to Genesis 9, where after the flood he makes a covenant with "every living creature" (Genesis 9:12) not to destroy the earth and its people as well as to Genesis 12 and the covenant with Abraham. So while God owes no one anything, he creates an order of justice and rights that he himself honors. These rights are based on both creation—the way he made us—and yet grace, because he does this out of love and mercy, not obligation. Here, Bavinck shows how biblical justice radically differs from all other secular political theories. Justice and rights are not ultimately created by social contract nor are they based on moral laws discerned by human reason alone (as the Enlightenment says), nor are they rooted in historical and material conditions (as Marxism says). Rather, they are rooted in the character of God as Creator and Redeemer (227-228).

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Then there were the laws of gleaning. Landowners were not to harvest out to the edges of their field, maximizing profits for themselves, and then later out of their great wealth, help the poor only through philanthropy. Rather, landowners had to leave some of the produce in the field so that both their hired workers and the poor could come “glean” and get food through their own labor (Leviticus 19:9-10; 23:22) Deuteronomy 24:19 says the gleanings “shall *be for* the immigrant, the fatherless, and the widow.” The Hebrew term rendered “be for” means ownership.<sup>9</sup> God says that some of the profit from your business does not belong to you, but to those with less. And just when the reader may think this sounds like socialism, Deuteronomy 23:24-25 comes in and protects the farmer from those who might try to take advantage and glean excessively. The Mosaic Law does not demand abstract equalizing of wealth or all elimination of social class. This giving was neither optional charity nor State redistribution.

Theologians like Calvin have taught that the basic theological ideas about wealth and justice reflected in the Mosaic laws are abiding.<sup>10</sup> Biblical scholar Craig Blomberg says that the view of wealth behind these laws does not fit into any contemporary or ancient economic models. The Jubilee and sabbath law does not honor the “rights of capital” in the way they are viewed in capitalistic societies. On the other hand, as we have seen, there’s not a hint of state ownership or abstract equalizing. The Bible, Blomberg writes, “suggests a sharp critique of 1) statism that disregards the precious treasure of personal rootage, and 2) the untrammelled individualism which secures individuals at the expense of community.”<sup>11</sup> Rather, out of love of God and love of neighbor, “The righteous (*saddiq*) are willing to disadvantage themselves to advantage the community; the wicked are willing to disadvantage the community to advantage themselves.”<sup>12</sup>

***As a result, we can say that to be radically generous is not only a matter of mercy, but of justice.***

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 261.

<sup>10</sup> As I noted above, the Westminster Confession says that these civil and judicial laws have principles of “general equity” behind them (WCF 19:4). John Calvin agrees, as can be seen in all his commentaries on the civil laws of Israel. He says of the gleaning laws: “God here inculcates liberality upon the possessors of the land...it is a sign of ingratitude, unkindly and maliciously, to withhold [from the poor] what we derive from his blessing” (*Institutes*, III.7.6.).

<sup>11</sup> Craig Blomberg, *Neither Poverty Nor Riches: A Biblical Theology of Possessions*, Leicester, UK: Apollos, 1999, 46-46.

<sup>12</sup> Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 1-15*, Eerdmans, 2004, 97.



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As a result, we can say that to be radically generous is not only a matter of mercy, but of justice.<sup>13</sup> Ezekiel 18:5 “opens with a general statement that the [righteous], the *ṣaddîq*, practices justice, followed by a list of eleven concrete ways in which humans exercise these qualities.” To fail to do any item in the list is to be unjust, and the list includes “he gives his food to the hungry, and provides clothing for the naked” (verse 7).<sup>14</sup> So to be ungenerous is to be unjust. Job 29 and 31,<sup>15</sup> Isaiah 1 and 58 make the same point.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> **Can love be both a debt and a gift? Yes.** People have difficulty with the relationship of justice to love. Justice seems to be all about giving people what they deserve while love is about *not* giving people what they deserve. Are they not then incompatible opposites? How can, for example, generosity to the poor be both an obligation (debt) to justice and also a free action (gift) of compassion? Romans 4:4 says that whatever God gives us must either be a wage demanded by justice or a gift of sheer grace and love. Since we can never make God owe us anything, because he is no one’s debtor, all we have from him is a gift (1 Corinthians 4:7). In relationships between human beings, however, we have not Romans 4:4, but Romans 13:8-9 as our guide: “Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law...” Here the Bible says that loving our neighbor is an obligation and debt, and yet at the same time can truly be an act of love. Calvin says, “Each [Christian] will so consider himself...a debtor to his neighbors” (*Institutes*, III.7.7; II.8.7). But for love to be love it can not be a forced response to coercion. So how does this work? People who think they can save themselves through their good works will obey the law of God because they *have* to. If you think you have to be loving people in order for God to take you to heaven, then you will do nice things for others. But that is not really loving *them*—it’s loving yourself by using them in order to get into heaven. However grace-changed people—who know they already have their salvation and who also know what it cost Jesus to secure it—now obey the law because they *want* to. They no longer love their neighbor as a way to get God’s benefits. Now they love neighbor for God’s sake and the neighbor’s sake, to bring joy to the God that gave them everything, and to give their neighbor the joy that God has given them. That is why John can say that love is both a command (1 John 2:7), and yet one we obey eagerly, freely: “We love because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19). In summary: God commands Christians to give a love that is not just the response to a command. He commands us to engage our hearts with the gospel until we freely love our neighbor. That’s how it works.

<sup>14</sup> Daniel Isaac Block, *The Book of Ezekiel, Chapters 1–24*, Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997, 571.

<sup>15</sup> **Generosity is part of justice.** When Job in chapter 29-31 says that he put on *seddeqah* as his clothing and *mishpat* as his turban (Job 29:14), he gives particular examples of unjust living, including “...if I denied the desires of the poor...If I kept my bread for myself, not sharing it with the fatherless...” Anyone who did not share their plenty with the poor should fear the “dreaded destruction from God...[F]or fear of his splendor I could not do such things” (Job 31:16-17, 22-23). John Hartley writes: “Job states the reason for his driving compassion for the unfortunate.... God’s *majesty* would overwhelm him. By this statement Job does not mean that he acted continually out of fear and was, therefore, afraid to venture anything. Rather it is to be understood in terms of the Wisdom literature, which taught that the fear of God or reverence is the basis of wisdom....If he had denied helping the unfortunate, Job knows that he could not *endure God’s majesty*. In God’s presence he would be condemned.” John E. Hartley, *The Book of Job*, Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988, 417.

<sup>16</sup> **Systemic injustice in the Bible: part 1.** Isaiah 58 says that people who exploit their employees (verse 3), fail to share their food with the hungry or provide shelter to the poor immigrant (verse 7), and do not

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In Luke 12:16-21, Jesus tells the parable of the rich fool who stored his wealth up for his own use when he should have been “rich toward God.” Then Jesus makes clear that to be “rich toward God” means “Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions and give to the poor” (Luke 12:32-33). Commentators point out that the term “sell your possessions” does not mean *all* your possessions but neither does it mean giving without any sacrifice.<sup>17</sup>

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Both socialism and libertarianism keep the obligation to share with the needy on the “horizontal” level. On the Left, money is the State’s and the distribution to the needy will be involuntary. On the Right, money is yours alone and any giving is voluntary and optional. The biblical teaching makes the primary dimension the “vertical”—the relationship to God. Your money is your own and no one must confiscate it from you. Yet you have moral obligations to both God and your neighbor to use your money unselfishly and with great generosity to love others with it, according to both your ability and to their needs.<sup>18</sup>

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spend themselves on behalf of the hungry are failing to “loose the chains of injustice” (verse 6). Old Testament professor Alec Motyer explains the term “chains of injustice” means that the exploitation of laborers and the failure to share your goods with the needy are sins against the freedom of human beings who are image bearers. It is to treat them as animals. “To loose the chains of injustice...points to the need to labor for the abolition of every way in which wrong social structures, or wrongdoers in society, destroy or diminish the due liberty of others. To untie the cords of the yoke refers to the need to eliminate every way in which people are treated like animals. The *oppressed* are those broken by life. It is not enough to work for amelioration; the objective is also to secure the positive values that have been lost. Instead of bondage and brokenness there should be freedom—not only the loosing of the yoke’s harness but also the breaking of the yoke itself, whether of injustice (6b), inhumanity (6c), or inequality (6d).” J.Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary*, IVP, 1993, 481.

<sup>17</sup> Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 9:51-24:53*, Baker Books, 1996, 1166-1167.

<sup>18</sup> **Older Christian witnesses on generosity. Are they liberal or conservative? Yes. (a) No abstract equalizing.** In his commentary on Deuteronomy Calvin notes that there is no elimination of private property, nor is there an ‘equalizing’ of wealth. “God does not indeed require that those who have abundance should so profusely give away their produce, as to despoil themselves...” Calvin points out how Paul uses the Mosaic law to bring balance to Christian generosity. No one is to be coerced or “hard pressed” (2 Corinthians 8:13). John Calvin, *A Harmony*, 150-152. **(b) Yet strong sense of obligation.** Because your money is God’s and God requires that you share it, with the needy, Basil the Great (AD 329-79) could write “The bread which you keep belongs to the hungry; the coats in your closet, to the naked, those shoes...to the shoeless; the gold you have hidden to the needy.” Obviously, Basil could not have been a Marxist. He is taking the “Master yet Servant” perspective of the Bible. Because you are but a Master of the household, no one should confiscate your money, but because you are a steward of God, and this is his will, the poor have a claim on you. **(c) Assess both ability and need.** Compare the *Westminster Larger Catechism* Q. 141, which says that our giving to the poor depends on our abilities and their necessities. “[G]iving and lending freely, according to our abilities, and the necessities of others” (WLC 141). In other words, the more we are able and the more others are in need, the more we should give. **(d) Summary:** The Bible addresses the concern of the conservative that private property be assured,

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## EQUALITY

A second facet of biblical justice is *universal equality*. Biblical justice requires that every person be treated according to the same standards and with the same respect, regardless of class, race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, or of any other social category. Leviticus 19:15 says: “You shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great, but in righteousness (*sedeqah*) shall you judge your neighbor.” Deuteronomy 16:19 says: “You shall not show partiality, and you shall not accept a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and subverts the cause of the righteous (*sedeqah*).”<sup>19</sup>

This biblical idea was unique and revolutionary in world history. Surrounding cultures and societies knew nothing of it—see the famous Code of Hammurabi.<sup>20</sup> The idea that every human had equal dignity and worth was equally foreign to the Greeks and Romans. Aristotle famously said that some races and nationalities deserved to be slaves. Tom Holland writes that ancient cultures, apart from Israel, completely lacked “any sense that the poor or the weak might have the slightest intrinsic value.”<sup>21</sup> What the Greeks, Romans, and other ancient cultures lacked was the book of Genesis, which teaches that all human beings were “equally... created in the image of God” (Genesis 1:27).<sup>22</sup> The Bible assumes it everywhere: “Whoever oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker, but whoever is kind to the needy honors God” (Proverbs 14:31). “Rich and poor have this in common: The Lord is the Maker of them all” (Proverbs 22:2).<sup>23</sup>

Jesus shocked the social sensibilities of the day by receiving and treating all classes of people with equal love and respect. Samaritans were seen by the Jews as racial inferiors,

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but also the concern of the liberal that the needs of community are not ignored—and yet the Bible also subverts both secular views at their foundations, allowing that sharing with the poor is, because of its “vertical” dimension, both “justice” (Psalm 112:9, *sadeqah*, Matthew 6:1, *dikaioσύνη*) as well as *mercy* (Luke 10:37). For more on how the Bible subverts its alternative rather than taking a “Middle Way” see note 67.

<sup>19</sup> Both of these quotes are from the English Standard Version translation.

<sup>20</sup> **The uniqueness of biblical justice in the ancient world.** In the Code of Hammurabi, criminal penalties changed depending on social class. If a man of an upper class murdered someone of a lower, his sentence could be just a financial fine. But if a man of lower class even stole from a person of higher class, the penalty was death. Biblical justice demanded the same penalties for the same crime for every person regardless of social status. And the Mosaic Law never punished theft with death, not because theft was not serious, but because the Bible saw every human life as infinitely more valuable than property. See Desmond T. Alexander, *From Paradise to Promised Land: An Introduction to the Pentateuch*, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing, 2012, 210, 217, 219.

<sup>21</sup> Tom Holland, *Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World*, Basic Books, 2019, 16.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, 443.

<sup>23</sup> As Martin Luther King Jr said in his “The American Dream” sermon: “There are no gradations in the image of God. Every man from a treble white to a bass black is significant on God’s keyboard, precisely because every man is made in the image of God.” This sermon can be found many places on the internet.

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yet twice Jesus places Samaritans on the same spiritual level as the Jews (Luke 9:54; 17:16). Jesus touched off a riot when he declared that God loved Gentiles, such as the widow of Zarephath and Naaman the Syrian (Luke 4:25-27), as much as Jews. Jesus reached out to lepers who were social outcasts, touching them and defying the contemporary social prohibitions (Luke 5:12-16; 17:11-19).

He exhorted his disciples to not only be generous to the poor (Luke 11:41; 12:33; 19:8) but to welcome them into their homes and families (Luke 14:13). Hospitality in that time was an act of friendship and partnership and it was shocking to treat the poor as equals in such a way. Through the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), Jesus defined “loving my neighbor” as giving practical, financial, and medical aid to someone of a different religion and race. Both doing justice and loving one’s neighbor means treating people of all races and religions and social classes as equal in dignity and worth.<sup>24</sup>

The rest of the New Testament follows Jesus’ rule: “[B]elievers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism.... If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, ‘Here’s a good seat for you,’ but say to the poor man, ‘You stand there’ or ‘Sit on the floor by my feet,’ have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? ...[Y]ou have dishonored the poor” (James 2:1-4, 6).

One of the most eloquent biblical appeals to treat all people as absolute equals—in both action and attitude—is found in John Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Calvin admits that “the great part of [the human race] are most unworthy if they be judged by their own merit.” Nevertheless he says: “But here Scripture helps in the best way when it teaches that we are not to consider what men merit of themselves but to look upon the image of God in all men, to which we owe all honor and love.”<sup>25</sup> He concludes: “Therefore, whatever man you meet who needs your aid, you have no reason to refuse to help him... [W]e remember not to consider men’s evil intention but to look upon the image of God in them, which cancels and effaces their transgressions, and with its beauty and dignity allures us to love and embrace them” .... [Christians] must put themselves in the place of him whom they see in need of their assistance, and pity his ill fortune as if

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<sup>24</sup> For a good summary, see Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, IVP, 1970. 90-91.

<sup>25</sup> Calvin writes that we are to see ourselves as debtors to help *anyone*, because everyone is made in God’s image—Christian or non-Christian. Even in Calvin’s hometown, this rule would hold true. Though all the citizens of Geneva were by law members of the Genevan Reformed Church, Calvin had no illusions that they were all believers. He wrote, “In this Church are mingled many hypocrites who have nothing of Christ but the name and outward appearance” (*Institutes* IV.1.7).

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they themselves experienced and bore it, so that they may be impelled by a feeling of mercy and humaneness to go to his aid just as to their own."<sup>26</sup>

## ADVOCACY

A third facet of biblical justice is *significant, life-changing advocacy for the poor*. Psalm 41:1 says, "Blessed is the one who gives active consideration to the weak and the poor."<sup>27</sup> The word translated "consideration" means believers are to pay close attention to the weak and the poor, seeking to understand the causes of their condition, and to spend significant

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<sup>26</sup> **John Calvin on loving our neighbor.** Here is Calvin's full text: "The Lord commands all men without exception 'to do good' [Heb. 13:16]. Yet the great part of them are most unworthy if they be judged by their own merit. But here Scripture helps in the best way when it teaches that we are not to consider that men merit of themselves but to look upon the image of God in all men, to which we owe all honor and love. However, it is among members of the household of faith that this same image is more carefully to be noted [Gal. 6:10], in so far as it has been renewed and restored through the Spirit of Christ. Therefore, whatever man you meet who needs your aid, you have no reason to refuse to help him. Say, 'He is a stranger'...[or] 'He is contemptible and worthless'; but the Lord shows him to be one to whom he has deigned to give the beauty of his image. Say that you owe nothing for any service of his; but God, as it were, has put him in his own place in order that you may recognize toward him the many and great benefits with which God has bound you to himself. Say that he does not deserve even your least effort for his sake; but the image of God, which recommends him to you, is worthy of your giving yourself and all your possessions. Now if he has not only deserved no good at your hand, but has also provoked you by unjust acts and curses, not even this is just reason why you should cease to embrace him in love and to perform the duties of love on his behalf [Matt. 6:14; 18:35; Luke 17:3]. You will say, 'He has deserved something far different of me.' Yet what has the Lord deserved? While he bids you forgive this man for all sins he has committed against you, he would truly have them charged against himself. Assuredly there is but one way in which to achieve what is not merely difficult but utterly against human nature: to love those who hate us, to repay their evil deeds with benefits, to return blessings for reproaches [Matt. 5:44]. It is that we remember not to consider men's evil intention but to look upon the image of God in them, which cancels and effaces their transgressions, and with its beauty and dignity allures us to love and embrace them....For it can happen that one who indeed discharges to the full all his obligations as far as outward duties are concerned is still all the while far away from the true way of discharging them. For you may see some who wish to seem very liberal and yet bestow nothing that they do not make reprehensible with a proud countenance or even insolent words. And in this tragic and unhappy age it has come to this pass, that most men give their alms contemptuously. Such depravity ought not to have been tolerable even among the pagans; of Christians something even more is required than to show a cheerful countenance and to render their duties pleasing with friendly words. First, they must put themselves in the place of him whom they see in need of their assistance, and pity his ill fortune as if they themselves experienced and bore it, so that they may be impelled by a feeling of mercy and humaneness to go to his aid just as to their own" (*Institutes*, III.7.6-7). John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, vol. 1, Westminster John Knox Press, 2011, 696–699.

<sup>27</sup> This translation and comment is based on Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1-50: Word Biblical Commentary*, Thomas Nelson, 2004, 318, 320.

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time and energy to changing their life situation.<sup>28</sup> “The righteous care about justice for the poor, but the wicked have no such concern” (Proverbs 29:7).

While we are to treat all equally, and not show partiality to any (Leviticus 19:15), we are to have special concern for the poor, the weak, and the powerless. Proverbs 31:8-9 says “Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves... Defend the rights (*sadeqah*) of the poor and needy.” Is this a contradiction? No. The Bible doesn’t say “Speak up for the rich and powerful.” It does not mean that the powerful are less important as persons before God. They certainly are equally as important. But they don’t *need* you to speak up for them. However, the poor do need you.



The call to advocacy assumes that the poor and the immigrant have equal rights. Deuteronomy 24:17, 19 says: “Do not deprive the foreigner or the fatherless of justice, or take the cloak of the widow as a pledge.... When you are harvesting in your field and you overlook a sheaf, do not go back to get it. Leave it for the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow, so that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands...” Christopher Wright explains: “The phrase is literally ‘do not turn aside the *mispat* of the alien, the fatherless, and the widow’ ...*mispat*...includes a person’s rights in general...The rules that follow are thus a matter of rights, not charity. In God’s sight a widow has a right not to be robbed of essential clothing to get a loan. And the gleaning provisions of verses 19-21 are rights, not hand-outs.”<sup>29</sup>

The call to advocacy assumes that a fact of our fallen world is a highly uneven distribution of opportunity and resources. “The poor are shunned even by their neighbors, but the rich have many friends”

(Proverbs 14:20; 19:4). To be born into a privileged family is to automatically have

<sup>28</sup> Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72: An Introduction and Commentary*, InterVarsity Press, 1973, 161.

<sup>29</sup> Wright, 260.

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“friends” — connections to people with power, immense social capital that paves the way in life. But the poor do not have such capital. Children in poor neighborhoods usually grow up with inferior schooling and in an environment extremely detrimental to learning. Conservatives may argue that this is the parents' fault while progressives will point to a failure of social policy. But no one believes that it is the *children's* fault. They are born into a world without “friends” who can open doors for them.

The call to advocacy also assumes the reality of “oppression.” The main Hebrew word for the poor is the word *a'ni*—a word derived from *an'not*, that means to be brought to a lowly status by force. There are innumerable ways that the wealthy and the powerful can turn things to their advantage—in courts, in the marketplace, in the community—at the expense of others. “Do not exploit the poor because they are poor and do not crush the needy in court” (Proverbs 22:22-23). Across the cultures and the centuries it has been seen that the less well off are more likely to be convicted and receive greater penalties for the same crimes those with greater resources commit. Proverbs 11:26 complains about sellers hoarding grain to drive up the prices to gouge the poor, and Deuteronomy 24:14-15 speaks of “taking advantage” (literally *robbing*) short-term laborers by failing to pay them daily.<sup>30</sup> Jeremiah 22:3 says, “Protect the person who is being cheated from the one who is mistreating... foreigners, orphans, or widows...” Jeremiah is singling out groups of people who can't protect themselves from mistreatment the way others can. Zechariah 7:10: “Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the foreigner or the poor.”

Each of the Ten Commandments reveals a prohibition, but also implies a positive opposite duty. So the *Westminster Larger Catechism* teaches that to obey the sixth

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<sup>30</sup> **Systemic injustice in the Bible: part 2.** A specific example of unfair wage payment is seen in Deuteronomy 24:14-15: “Do not take advantage of a hired worker who is poor and needy, whether that worker is a fellow Israelite or a foreigner residing in one of your towns. Pay them their wages each day before sunset, because they are poor and are counting on it. Otherwise they may cry to the Lord against you, and you will be guilty of sin.” Resident laborers and servants were paid weekly or even less often. “Hired workers,” however, worked short-term jobs and were more likely to be among the very poor who had to spend most of their money on food. So they needed their wages daily even though that was disadvantageous to the owners. Market forces were such that laborers would have had to take the job no matter what, and so owners were characteristically *not* paying them daily (that is likely the case, for otherwise there would have been no need for the law). But the Bible says that such failure to pay every evening was to “take advantage” of the poor, a Hebrew word (*asaq*) that means “to rob” — to unfairly oppress. They were preventing the poor from having access to the basic, minimum nourishment that the other laborers had. In his commentary on this text, Calvin saw the principle as binding on employers today. He says that when we employ people we must not: “be too illiberal and stingy toward them, since nothing can be more disgraceful than that, when they are in our service, they should not at least have enough to live on frugally... We infer that this law is not political, but altogether spiritual, and binding on our consciences before the judgement seat of God.” John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Four Last Books of Moses Arranged in the Form of a Harmony*, trans. Charles William Bingham, Baker, 1979, 114.

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commandment, “You shall not kill” includes the duty of not “neglecting or withdrawing the lawful and necessary means of preservation of life” (WLC Q.136). That means not merely that we are not to deliberately kill anyone, but also that we are not to allow conditions that undermine the safety and bodily well-being of any of our neighbors.<sup>31</sup> It means not ignoring neighborhoods with terrible healthcare, or dangerous environmental factors, or inadequate nutrition and housing that ruin the physical well-being of residents.

The supreme advocate for the poor is God himself. He takes up the “cause” of the needy and calls his people to do the same. “Do not crush the needy in court, for the Lord will take up their case” (Proverbs 22:23; cf. Deuteronomy 10:18-19). Jesus says: “will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? ...I tell you he will see that they get justice, and quickly” (Luke 18:7-8). Jesus himself takes the role of advocate and calls out the Pharisees for being “lovers of money” (Luke 16:14) and the scribes for “devouring widow’s houses” (Luke 20:47), taking advantage of their precarious financial and legal situation.<sup>32</sup>

So how do we do advocacy? There are at least three ways to do this, according to the Bible. There is direct relief to meet material needs (Luke 10:30-35). Here the advocacy is focused on getting a person or family the legal, medical, financial and other resources they need to face a crisis. Then there is empowerment: helping a person, family, or community gain self-sufficiency (Deuteronomy 15:13-14). This invests in ways that help the person or family or group come to the place where they have the resources and forms of capital—social, financial, cultural, personal—so that they are no longer in the position of constantly needing advocacy and help from outside.

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<sup>31</sup> Calvin wrote on the sixth commandment: “Each man ought to concern himself with the safety of all....We are accordingly commanded, if we find anything of use to us in saving our neighbors’ lives, faithfully to employ it; if there is anything that makes for their peace, to see to it; if anything harmful, to ward it off; if they are in any danger, to lend a helping hand.” John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion & 2*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, vol. 1, Westminster John Knox Press, 2011, 404.

<sup>32</sup> “Jesus’ denunciation of the scribes echoes that of Israelite prophets, who railed against the powerful and wealthy for preying on the poor and weak, including widows (Isa 10:2; Amos 2; Mic 3).... Unlike Sadducees, scribes were not as a rule wealthy, and thus they were in varying degrees dependent for their livelihood on gifts of worshipers and benefactors. Some scribes exploited their esteem and abused the generosity shown to them by others. In an earlier exchange with a scribe (10:27), Jesus defined genuine religion by quoting Deut 6:5 and Lev 19:18: the sum of the law is love of God and neighbor. Some people, however, harm others rather than help them, and the worst of these use religion as both a means and a justification of their harm. The judgment of Jesus on those who traffic in piety for the purpose of self-aggrandizement is uncompromising: they will be ‘punished most severely’ (v. 47).” James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Luke*, Eerdmans, 2015, 587.



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Finally advocacy can take on the social structures that disadvantage certain groups. Job tells us that he not only clothed the naked, but he “broke the fangs of the wicked and made them drop their victims” (Job 29:17). This can take a number of forms. The church may forbid its members from participating in those unjust social structures, thereby undermining them. Paul forbade Christians taking part in “manstealing” —slave trading based on kidnapping, something that was common in Roman society (1 Timothy 1:8-11).<sup>33</sup>

In Luke 14, Jesus commanded his followers to completely abandon the patronage system, which was a major source of social inequality (see below). Esau McCaulley, Tom Holland and others have shown how the early church’s teaching on love and universal human dignity was the basis for the eventual dismantling of slavery.<sup>34</sup> Sometimes taking on social structures means speaking publicly against rulers and leaders who are doing wrong. In Daniel 4:27, Daniel calls a pagan king to renounce his sins “by being kind to the oppressed.” McCaulley shows that when Jesus’ ministry brings him into conflict with the ruling power, namely Herod, he challenged him and called him “that fox” (Luke 13:32-33), a public rebuke of a political leader by a religious one.

## RESPONSIBILITY

A fourth facet of biblical justice is *responsibility*—both corporate and individual. One of the most basic definitions of justice is “giving people what they are due.” But are we responsible only for our own sins, or are we also complicit, responsible, and involved in the sins of others as well?

### *Corporate responsibility:*

In Joshua 7, Achan sins by stealing some of the plunder of Jericho and hiding it. The text assumes that Achan’s family was executed along with him (verses 15, 25).<sup>35</sup> Further, the text says God held the entire nation responsible for this act. Because of it, some Israelites died in the first assault on Ai as a punishment for the sin of an individual that they did

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<sup>33</sup> Esau McCaulley, *Reading While Black: African-American Biblical Interpretation as an Exercise in Hope*, IVP, 2020, 53.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, 139-162.

<sup>35</sup> **Corporate responsibility: part 1.** “v. 25... The use of both singular and plural probably indicates that Achan was put to death separately, to make an example of him. The fact that his family also shared in that fate may be due to their common knowledge of the crime. After all, the goods were hidden in the parental tent. The element of corporate guilt is here also. Deut. 24:16 is held in balance by Deut. 5:9. The former should not be seen as representing a more individualistic, less ‘sacral’ view than the latter. Properly understood, the Bible does not teach individualism anywhere. Care should also be taken not to view the corporate element as only a remnant of a primitive mode of thought that is inconsistent with modern thinking.” Marten H. Woudstra, *The Book of Joshua*, Eerdmans, 1981, 130–131.

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not even know about (verse 5, 11-12). In Numbers 16 the families of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram died with them for those men's sins.<sup>36</sup> In 2 Samuel 21, God sent three years of famine on Israel and refused to grant prayers on behalf of the land (verse 14). When David inquired why, God told him that he held Israel corporately responsible for what King Saul had done to the Gibeonites even though Saul was dead and gone.<sup>37</sup>

It is common to respond to these accounts by arguing that God had a unique relationship to Israel as his covenant people and therefore he dealt with them as a corporate body, while those outside he held responsible only as individuals. But God also held pagan nations accountable for sins of their forebears. God punished the Amalekites in 1 Samuel 15:2 for what they did when Israel came out of Egypt, even though that had happened centuries before. In Deuteronomy 23:3-8, God excluded members of some nations (Ammon, Moab) from being admitted to his presence, while not excluding others (Egypt)—and does so on the basis of how their ancestors acted generations earlier. Similarly, in Amos 1-2, God held pagan nations accountable for sins of the past, including war atrocities and enslavement of whole peoples.

*But are we responsible only for our own sins, or are we also complicit, responsible, and involved in the sins of others as well?*

New Testament leaders recognized corporate responsibility for Jesus' death after the resurrection of Christ. In Acts 2, Peter holds those who were in Jerusalem at the time responsible (Acts 2: 22-23, 36; Acts 10:39) though all of those people did not actually hand

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<sup>36</sup> **Corporate responsibility: part 2.** Some argue that the rest of the family must have participated themselves in the sin—namely, of questioning Moses' leadership in defiance of God. But even if there was some participation, since the same punishment was meted out equally on all of them, and since it is unlikely their individual sins were equally egregious (especially the children's), then there is some kind of corporate responsibility here that goes beyond punishment for individual sin. See Timothy R. Ashley, *The Book of Numbers*, Eerdmans, 1993, 320.

<sup>37</sup> **Corporate responsibility: part 3.** Although the Gibeonites were pagans, Israel's leaders had sworn an oath that they would spare their lives (Joshua 9:15,19), but King Saul had broken that oath and had put many Gibeonites to death and God held the entire nation corporately accountable for it even though Saul was dead and gone. The rest of the 2 Samuel 21 account, however, is troubling, because the Gibeonites demand that seven male descendants of Saul be given to them to be killed, and David hands them over. There is no consensus among commentators in their evaluations of David's action. Some see this as a failure on David's part, a capitulation to the pagan sensibilities of the Gibeonites. Others see it as an outworking of an additional corporate responsibility—not only is all of Israel guilty for broken promises of leaders, but Saul's descendants are particularly guilty and punished for his sin. I'm not convinced by either of these last two arguments. But for our purposes we do not have to resolve this latter question. What is clear is that God holds a nation responsible for the sins of its leaders over generations.

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Jesus over to die. Yet when addressing the Jews in Pisidian Antioch, Paul says that it was those who lived in Jerusalem and their rulers who crucified Jesus (Acts 13:27). He does not blame all Jews everywhere for Christ's death.<sup>38</sup> In addition, both Ezra (Ezra 9) and Daniel (Daniel 9) confess sins of their people that they were not personally guilty of themselves.<sup>39</sup>

So the Bible teaches that corporate responsibility is a greater reality than individualistic modern western people want to believe. On the other hand, there are real limits to it as well—it cannot be applied indiscriminately.

## **Corporate bonds:**

Corporate responsibility is at the very heart of the Bible and the gospel. We can only be saved because Jesus was punished for our sins, sins he did not commit (Romans 5:12ff; 1 Corinthians 15:21-23; 2 Corinthians 5:21). But how is that possible? It is because faith and the Spirit of God create a union between us and Jesus. Corporate responsibility depends on the kinds of bonds and unions that human beings have in community. They include:

1. *Familial.* We are more the product of our families than we want to admit. Parents see their character flaws reproduced in their children and some responsibility for their children's sins is rightfully felt. When individuals sin, they do so in some measure because their families have allowed them to become the kind of persons who sin in that

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<sup>38</sup> I'm indebted to Kevin DeYoung for his insights on Acts and corporate responsibility. See especially his "Thinking Theologically About Racial Tensions: Sin and Guilt", July 23, 2020, found at <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/thinking-theologically-about-racial-tensions-sin-and-guilt/>

<sup>39</sup> **Corporate responsibility: part 4.** When Ezra learns that many of the Jews had intermarried with pagans in violation of God's law (Ezra 9:3), he confesses "our guilt" and "our sins" (verses 6-15) even though he had not personally committed that sin at all. Here we may be seeing a leader in authority who is guilty not of the sin *per se*, but of failing to prevent the people's sin "on his watch." In Daniel 9:4-19, we again see a man confessing the sins of his people. In this case, however, he is not speaking of the sins of contemporaries (as in Ezra's case), but of his ancestors, saying: "We have sinned and done wrong. We have been wicked and rebelled. We have turned away from your commands and laws. We have not listened to your servants the prophets..." (verses 5-6). Several things to note. First, there is no evidence anywhere in the biblical accounts of Daniel's life that he personally participated in any of the behaviors he is confessing. Second, Daniel was not a man in authority who would bear some responsibility for what happened "on his watch"—he was talking of the past. Third, Daniel seems to distinguish his sins from the sins of his people, even though he confesses both. He says: "While I was speaking and praying, confessing my sin and the sin of my people Israel..." (verse 20). Some argue this proves that Daniel *did* participate directly in the same sins of his ancestors. But the easiest way to convey that would have been for Daniel simply to say, "our sins" rather than speak of two categories of sins—his and his people's. We cannot be dogmatic here, but we cannot read Daniel 9:20, as some have, as proving that Daniel participated in the same sins of his ancestors.

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way. So families bear some responsibility, through sins of omission or commission, for the wrongdoings of individual members.

2. *Political and Civil.* In a political community, the people are somewhat responsible for the sins of the leaders and *vice versa*. Israel asked for a king (1 Samuel 8-10) and even though they did not “elect” Saul, neither did they resist or rebel against him when he fell into evil. So they bore some responsibility for his sin. Likewise, leaders understand that they bear some responsibility for the sins that people do “on their watch.”

3. *Communal.* Those who were present in Jerusalem were held responsible for Jesus’ death but the Jews as an entire race were *not* blamed for it (Acts 13:27). The implication is that the people present at the time could have done things together to block or stop the crucifixion. While they were not formally co-citizens of a body politic, they had relationships and power that they could have exercised. If we are in close relationships with people and do nothing about their sin, we bear some responsibility as well (cf. Ezekiel 33; Galatians 6:1-2).

4. *Institutional.* Institutionalized ways of doing things range from how we check out at a grocery store to how we apply and get admitted to a college. Individuals may perform only one or two actions within such social systems, but by doing so they support the whole system. If the system privileges the powerful and disadvantages the weak, individuals within the institution are responsible for the unjust effects even if they cannot see (or do not want to see) them.

At a banquet, Jesus “noticed how the guests picked the places of honor at the table” (Luke 14:7). The purpose of dinner engagements was to cultivate relationships with people who could open doors for you and who in turn would expect favors from you and access to your network of contacts and assets.<sup>40</sup> Because of this highly institutionalized social system, people of means would never invite the poor to a meal, because their presence would endanger the social status of the host and the others at the meal would feel their time wasted. But this systemically disadvantaged those at the lower end of the social order.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> “Central to the political stability of the Empire was the ethics of reciprocity, a gift-and-obligation system that tied every person, from the emperor in Rome to the child in the most distance province, into an intricate web of social relations....[G]ifts, by unwritten definition, were never “free,” but were given and received with either explicit or implicit strings attached....” Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, Eerdmans, 1997, 550.

<sup>41</sup> “Seen through Jesus’ eyes...[these] orthodox conventions have as their consequence the exclusion of the poor.” Ibid, 552.

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Jesus refuses to let his followers participate in this system at all. He says when they have a dinner, “do not invite your friends, your brothers or sisters, your relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed” (Luke 14:12-14). For believers who were not poor, the regular invitation to the needy and the weak into their homes would negate social structures that created “exclusionary social boundaries,” and the new system would trigger “a form of unpremeditated generosity...on behalf of the poor.... It is difficult to exaggerate the repercussions of such practices.”<sup>42</sup>



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<sup>42</sup> **Systemic injustice in the Bible: part 3.** For a full quote: “Jesus’ counterproposal, if conventionalized, would negate tendencies toward exclusionary social boundaries and the value of reciprocity. It is difficult to exaggerate the repercussions of such practices. First, they would deconstruct the categories of insider-outsider that come to expression in the two contrasting lists of invitees. In v 12, Jesus provides a catalogue of one’s ‘inner circle,’ persons with whom one enjoys relationships of equality and mutuality—a list grounded in the commerce of power and privilege, and in social location as an insider. The list in v 13, on the other hand, is reminiscent of the inventories of certain Qumranic texts concerned with the identity of God’s people and, more particularly, with who are excluded from the status of the elect. Jesus’ message overturns such preoccupations, presenting ‘the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind’—notable examples of those relegated to low status, marginalized according to normal canons of status honor in the Mediterranean world—as persons to be numbered among one’s table intimates and, by analogy, among the people of God. Second, such practices would sound the death knell for the ethics of patronage and, more generally, for the regulation of social affiliations according to the demands of reciprocity. The behaviors Jesus demands would collapse the distance between rich and poor, insider and outsider; reverting to anthropological models of economic exchange, such relations would be characterized by “generalized reciprocity”—that is, by the giving of gifts, the extension of hospitality, without expectation of return (see above, 6:32–35). Persons previously treated as outsiders, strangers, would be embraced as members of one’s extended kin group. Insofar as Jesus’ host and table companions are comprised of the socially elite, his message to them would entail a form of unpremeditated generosity involving redistribution on behalf of ‘the poor.’” Ibid, 552–554.

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## *The personal becomes structural injustice:*

The sinful human heart rejects God as Lord and Savior and seeks to justify itself (Romans 1:21-25; 9:32), and one of the ways we justify ourselves is by “looking down” on those who are different (Luke 18:9-14). One of the main ways humans do this is through differences of race and culture. We take mere cultural differences and preferences that—biblically speaking, are neither good or bad—and we view them as virtues. We see cultures who lack those things as inferior. This is how we bolster our sense of self-worth. The result is “hostility” between those who are racially and ethnically different (Ephesians 2:14). This is such a natural and deeply entrenched strategy of the human heart that even Peter the apostle fell into it (Galatians 2:11-14) despite all the revelations of Acts 10-11. Now if generations of racial-cultural pride and self-righteousness is deeply entrenched in the hearts of individuals, and if we are social creatures who naturally form institutions, then we should expect to see structural, not just individual racism. By that I mean, to quote John Piper:

*“...the cumulative effect of racist feelings, beliefs, and practices that become embodied and expressed in the policies, rules, regulations, procedures, expectations, norms, assumptions, guidelines, plans, strategies, objectives, practices, values, standards, narratives, histories, records, and the like, which accordingly disadvantage the devalued race and privilege the valued race.”<sup>43</sup>*

## *Individual responsibility:*

So we find ourselves in a place where we should express repentance for sins done by people with whom we are connected, past and present. But how do we explain two key Old Testament texts that teach, quite categorically, individuals should only be punished for their own sins?

The first is Ezekiel 18:1-32: “The one who sins is the one who will die. The child will not share the guilt of the parent, nor will the parent share the guilt of the child” (verse 20). The second is Deuteronomy 24:16: “Parents are not to be put to death for their children, nor children put to death for their parents; each will die for their own sin.” As we have seen, some kinds of corporate responsibility exist. So how do corporate and individual responsibility relate to each other?

The answer is that there is an *asymmetrical* relationship between them, with the individual responsibility being the strongest. For example, leaders should feel responsibility for

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<sup>43</sup> John Piper, “Structural Racism: The Child of Structural Pride”, *Desiring God*, November 15, 2016. Found at <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/structural-racism>.

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wrongs done by others under their authority that they themselves did not do. And yet, individuals actually committing those wrongs always bear the greatest responsibility.

Old Testament scholar Walter Kaiser sums this up well. First, Ezekiel 18 makes clear that one's spiritual and eternal destiny is based solely on their individual repentance and actions. God does not make final judgment on anyone for their parents' or nation's sins—only for their own. Second, Deuteronomy 24:16 is talking about standard human jurisprudence. Deuteronomy is telling judges in Israel that they may never legally punish anyone for their parent's or their children's sins.<sup>44</sup> The reality of corporate sin does not “swallow up” individual moral responsibility, nor does individual responsibility disprove the reality of corporate evil and responsibility. There is corporate responsibility, but in the end we are held responsible for the sins we personally commit.

## ***Responsibility and complexity:***

Secular worldviews tend to be reductionistic—they look for a single cause that explains all the problems of life. So progressives today stress the reality of corporate responsibility virtually to the exclusion of the individual, while many conservatives and Libertarians deny any corporate responsibility at all. The Left believes unequal outcomes are virtually always due to injustice, while the Right believes unequal outcomes are virtually always due to personal irresponsibility.

But to take either position is to adopt some secular view of justice rather than a biblical one. The biblical text shows that both my sins and my outcomes in life (whether I am well-off or poor) are due to complex factors, both individual and corporate and environmental. Poverty can be due to individual failure and wrong doing (Proverbs 6:6-7; 23:21), or to social injustice and social structures (Proverbs 13:23, 18:23; Exodus 22:21-27), or to environmental factors such as floods, disabling injuries or illnesses. It is because of this complexity that the rendering of justice—both the distribution of rights and punishments—requires the greatest wisdom, deliberation and prudence.

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<sup>44</sup> **Corporate responsibility: part 5.** Most evangelical Old Testament scholars conclude that God recognizes both corporate and individual responsibility and guilt for sin. I think Walter Kaiser in *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Zondervan, 1991) does one of the best jobs at explaining the relationship (see 86-87, especially). Alec Motyer follows Kaiser's lead as he says in a footnote in his Exodus commentary. As does also Christopher J.H. Wright in his commentaries on Deuteronomy and Ezekiel. First, Kaiser sees Ezekiel 18 as making clear that one's spiritual and eternal destiny is based solely on one's individual repentance and actions. God does not in the end make final judgement on anyone for their parents' or nation's sins—only for their own. Secondly, Kaiser points out that Deuteronomy 24:16 is talking about normal human jurisprudence, telling judges in Israel that they may never legally punish anyone for their parent's or their children's sins.

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## 3. WORKING FOR JUSTICE

So how do believers who understand the differences between biblical justice and the secular theories of justice actually take part in efforts against injustice in our society? They should—

### 1. Start with the church.

No one will listen to Christians calling the society to more just social relationships if within the church itself those relationships are just as flawed and unjust. Within the church, wealth is to be shared generously between rich and poor (2 Corinthians 8:13-15; cf. Leviticus 25). Materialism is a grievous sin (James 5:1-6; 1 Timothy 6:17-19). Inside the church, the races should not merely 'get along,' but must become a new humanity (Ephesians 2:15) in which the old divisions no longer prevail. The church is a "royal nation," a new society (1 Peter 2:9) in which family life, business practices, race relations, and interpersonal relationships are changed. We are a pilot plant of the future kingdom of God, a place for the world to get a partial glimpse of what the humanity will look like under Jesus' kingship and justice.<sup>45</sup>

*No one will listen to Christians calling the society to more just social relationships if within the church itself those relationships are just as flawed and unjust.*

While I will say more on this below, this means at the very least that churches in an increasingly multi-ethnic society must themselves be multi-ethnic, opening doors of leadership for Christians of all races and classes. Several good books on how to work toward this are by Irwyn Ince, Manny Ortiz, George Yancey, and Efrem Smith.<sup>46</sup>

### 2. Work in the world.

Abraham Kuyper argued that the institutional church's job was to make disciples rather than to change society, but *it had to form disciples in such a way that they went out into the world to do justice.* With some important qualifications,<sup>47</sup> I believe this is generally a good distinction to make.

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<sup>45</sup> Francis Schaeffer, *Pollution and the Death of Man*, Tyndale, 1970, 81-93.

<sup>46</sup> Irwyn Ince, *The Beautiful Community: Unity, Diversity, and the Church at Its Best*, IVP, 2020; Manuel Ortiz, *One New People: Models for Developing a Multiethnic Church*, IVP, 1996; George Yancey, *One Body, One Spirit: Principles of Successful Multiracial Churches*, IVP, 2003; Efrem Smith, *The Post-Black and Post-White Church: Becoming the Beloved Community in a Multi-Ethnic World*, Josey-Bass, 2012.

<sup>47</sup> With some important critiques and qualifications, Daniel Strange accepts this basic 'division of labor'. See his very helpful article, "Rooted and Grounded? The Legitimacy of Abraham Kuyper's Distinction



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At the practical level, church leaders usually do not have the expertise to make public statements on political issues, or to run affordable housing complexes, community development corporations, schools, etc. I have seen churches trying to institutionally do justice get consumed by it and as a result neglect the life-blood of the church—evangelism and formation of disciples through Word and Sacrament.

Another problem is that of partisanship (see below). Constant, direct political declarations from a local church can be a way of saying, “If you don’t agree with our politics, you won’t be welcome here to hear the gospel.” So, as a general guideline, it is best for local churches to encourage their lay people to form and lead organizations in the community that work for justice.<sup>48</sup>

*We are a pilot plant of the future kingdom of God, a place for the world to get a partial glimpse of what the humanity will look like under Jesus’ kingship and justice.*

Nevertheless, churches among the poor and marginalized “have never had the luxury of separating faith from political action.”<sup>49</sup> For example, during the years of Jim Crow laws and constant lynchings, should the Black church have stayed “a-political” and not called out civic leaders for their injustice? As we saw above, both Jesus and Daniel spoke to and critiqued political leaders.<sup>50</sup> In summary, while the institutional church’s first

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between Church as Institute and Church as Organism, and Its Usefulness in Constructing an Evangelical Public Theology”, *Themelios*, Volume 40, Issue 3, December, 2015. Found at <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/rooted-and-grounded-legitimacy-of-kuypers-distinction/>

<sup>48</sup> The Christian Community Development Association has traditionally advised that any church seeking to do justice in a neighborhood should let its members establish a separate 501(c)3 corporation under the leadership of lay people to do programs of compassion and justice. This is recommended rather than having local church elders or boards running both the church and all the other organizations.

<sup>49</sup> McCaulley, *Reading While Black*, 49.

<sup>50</sup> I continue to believe that, in general, the institutional church should avoid or be sparing in its political declarations and should leave the direct work of politics and social reform to Christians gathered into various organizations. But I am fully aware that this distinction, while usually helpful and important, applies in different degrees depending on the state of a society. In times of social crises—such as in Nazi Germany—the church necessarily must institutionally take political stands. In the 1930s and 40s the German church’s professed ‘non-political’ position was just an excuse, and eventually they ended up taking an oath of loyalty to Hitler. Of course it will always be debatable as to when that ‘social crisis’ line has been crossed. U.S. society—from slavery to Jim Crow laws, from a century of lynchings to systemic exclusion from banking and capital—has been a rolling, long-term social crisis for African-Americans,

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responsibility is to evangelize and disciple through the Word of God—that discipling and training must motivate and equip Christians to do justice or it is not *true* to the Word of God.

### 3. With hopeful patience.

At his second and final coming, Jesus will end all evil (Acts 17:31), but at his first coming he came not to bring judgment but to bear it, so we could be forgiven and accepted. So Jesus is already present in the world to change lives, but final justice is waiting for us at the end of time. Christians who are grounded in this “already” but “not yet” of the kingdom of God have a balance of both patience and hope. We know God will bring in justice, and so we can work with hopeful confidence. But we also know that we are not the Saviors who will be able to accomplish it. Biblical justice humbles us, because when we look at the cross we realize that we were perpetrators of injustice—yet Jesus was patient with us and forgave us. So Christians doing justice must not be abrasive nor caustic. When listening to others (see below), we should not insist that they talk nicely, especially if they are describing experiences of injustice. The Psalms are filled with the cries of the oppressed—many of them white hot—against injustice (cf. Psalm 137). I am not recommending that we *tone police* others but rather that we *heart police* ourselves. When we allow our heart’s hope for justice to slide off of Jesus Christ crucified and let it rest in some program, group, or even our own efforts, we will become both self-righteous as well as despondent. The gospel helps justice-workers maintain a quiet confidence in the midst of the chaos.

### 4. With informed listening.<sup>51</sup>

Christianity stands antithetically over against other views of reality.<sup>52</sup> But the doctrine of “common grace” is that God gives gifts of wisdom, moral insight, goodness, and beauty to those who are not believers.<sup>53</sup> So despite the antithetical nature of human worldviews,

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and so in general I think the Black church’s much more direct institutional political involvement has been right.

<sup>51</sup> Please refer to footnotes 3 and 4 for more background.

<sup>52</sup> As stated more fully in footnote 3 above: Other views are reductionistic and seek to explain reality in terms of some factor in the place of God. This means each non-Christian worldview creates an idol, looking to some created thing to both explain and solve our problems. The one-sidedness of these views leaves them unable to account for things (such as moral value) that people intuitively know, and also unable to deal with the complexity of reality.

<sup>53</sup> As stated more fully in footnote 4 above: The law of God is ‘written in [the] hearts’ of all (Romans 2:14,15) giving people an inward sense of God’s morality and justice. The Bible often speaks of deeds of unregenerate persons as good and right (Luke 6:33; 2 Kings 14:3,14-16, 20, 27; cf. 2 Chronicles 25:2). All good and great artistic expressions, effective governments, and scientific advances that come through non-believers are God’s gifts to the human race (James 1:17). Romans 1:18-20 says that all human beings have a primordial knowledge of God, but they suppress it. Because all human beings are in the image of God, non-believers are better than their worldviews. Calvin makes the case that the Greek and Roman

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we can and need to learn from non-believers. The doctrine of sin means we Christians are not as wise as our right worldview should make us; the doctrine of common grace means non-believers are not as unwise as their wrong worldview should make them. But we should be *informed* in our listening, careful to not adopt their worldview (Romans 12:1-2).<sup>54</sup>

It is often asked—is it possible for a Christian to reject Critical Race Theory as a world view but still use it as a tool? Esau McCaulley explains the frustration that Black and Latino Christians feel when they say things about racism and injustice that the Black church has been saying for more than a century which now is dismissed as “Critical Race Theory.”<sup>55</sup> It may be the case that a young white person who is newly alert to systemic injustice has gotten his or her insights from some contemporary academic source steeped in CRT. But if the Black church came to an insight about justice from the Bible long before any rise of Marxism, then it can’t be the result of Critical Theory.

McCaulley says there are four problems with telling Christian leaders of color that they have bought into CRT:

*“1. Much of the dialogue fails to take the Black Christian tradition seriously; 2. It creates a climate in which Christians of color are presumed guilty until proven innocent; 3. It is a word out of season in the communities most concerned with its impact; 4. Those accused of CRT are often those actually contending for the viability of Black/White/multi-ethnic*

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pagan philosophers were fundamentally wrong about God and reality and yet have, by common grace, things to teach us (*Institutes* II.2.12, 15).

<sup>54</sup> **The reality of a Christian perspective.** Readers will see, especially in my article on “[A Biblical Critique of Secular Justice and Critical Theory](#),” that I am applying Bavinck’s ideas on worldview to my analysis of Libertarianism, Liberalism, Utilitarianism, and Postmodern/ Critical Theory. I have pointed out the reductionisms and how each makes idols out of created things. There are those who insist that there is no place to critique one of these current justice-views without standing in one of the others. For example, it is argued that any criticism of laissez-faire capitalism *must* be coming from a socialistic source. The inability to recognize the possibility of some Christian ground to stand on that is not any of these alternatives comes from, I believe, the lack of understanding of worldview, as expounded by Bavinck and others, and a capitulation to the reductionism of modern worldviews (for more, see footnote 3). Christians, especially in the U.S., are naïve about the inevitability of presuppositions.

<sup>55</sup> The Black church in the 20<sup>th</sup> century kept its theological orthodoxy, like white evangelicalism, but it also recognized the presence of systemic injustice in American society to which white evangelicals were largely blind. This made the Black church unique among U.S. Protestants. Unlike the liberal mainline church, they continued to hold to the full authority of the Bible, and to the deity of Christ, the physical resurrection, the need to be born again. But unlike the orthodox white church, they saw the Bible’s concern for justice and its critique of injustice and racism. See Mary Beth Swetnam Mathews, *Doctrine and Race: African-American Evangelicals and Fundamentalism Between the Wars*, University of Alabama, 2018.

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*Christian cooperation. Thus, the consistent accusation of CRT hinders the mission and cooperation of the church.*"<sup>56</sup>

So—can a Christian use Critical Race Theory as a tool? On the one hand, CRT can't be used merely as a tool apart from its worldview assumptions, because the underlying worldview in many ways *is* the tool.<sup>57</sup> CRT ([as discussed in the last article](#)) sees all racial disparities and inequalities as due to structural factors—period. Like all non-Christian theories, it is reductionistic. That is its fatal weakness,<sup>58</sup> but it can also be a strength. There is an old saying: "If your only tool is a hammer, then everything looks like a nail." CRT will think that many things are "nails" (that is, systemic, structural injustice) that are not. However, it will not likely miss any real nails. And since our biblical worldview *does* understand that there is corporate responsibility and structural injustice, then CRT thinkers may show Christians some things that our own sin and cultural blinders have missed.

CRT tools such as "interest convergence" and "structural determinism" do not always work.<sup>59</sup> But they can remind Christians of the social-critical tools in their own biblical

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<sup>56</sup> Esau McCaulley, "Discerning Friends from Enemies: Critical Race Theory, Anglicans in North America, and the Real Crisis" *Anglican Compass*, May 6, 2020. Found at <https://anglicancompass.com/discerning-friends-from-enemies-critical-race-theory-anglicans-in-north-america-and-the-real-crisis/>

<sup>57</sup> I am not here arguing that Critical Race Theory *is* a comprehensive "worldview." See footnote 3. Like most schools of thought, it is a mishmash of somewhat disparate elements. Nevertheless, all schools of thought are grounded in underlying assumptions about the nature of reality. For example, they must assume particular views of human nature. Is it spiritual or only physical? Sinful or good or 'blank slate'? Shaped by individual choice or by society? While CRT is not a full worldview, it does not work from a biblical anthropology.

<sup>58</sup> **The reductionisms of Marxism.** One example of this fatal flaw can be seen in the "dependency theory" which was originally a pillar of Latin American Liberation Theology, a non-western, 20<sup>th</sup> century parallel to CRT. In the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, most believed that the poverty of Latin American countries was due to simple underdevelopment and that they could come to greater prosperity by following the same path as countries in the West—namely through capitalism. But Marxists believed that the Western countries' capitalistic prosperity was the whole *cause* of Latin American poverty—they became rich only by exploiting Latin American raw materials. Therefore, they argued, capitalism as a system would only work for the West and Latin America should instead be socialistic. But by the late 80s, the leading thinkers of Liberation Theology, such as Gustavo Gutierrez, were seeing that the causes of Latin American poverty were more complex and they began distancing themselves not only from dependency theory, but from socialism. See Christian Smith, *The Emergence of Liberation Theology: Radical Religion and Social Movement Theory*, University of Chicago Press, 1991, 145-149, 230.

<sup>59</sup> For an accessible introduction to CRT, see Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*, New York University Press, 2017. One of CRT's "tools" is "interest convergence." Originally developed by Derrick Bell, this is the assumption that white people only ever listen and concede to Black people's demands when it is in their self-interest to do so. As a reductive tool to understand society and history, this denies complexity and sometimes does not work. See Rodney Starke, *For the Glory of God: How Monotheism Led to Reformation, Science, Witch-Hunts, and the End of Slavery*, Princeton, 2003, 291-366,

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worldview's toolbox—such as the doctrine of sin (which is a Christian understanding of 'interest convergence') and the power of words. Both Christopher Watkin and Esau McCaulley point out a number of the Bible's social-critical tools for analyzing cultures, all of which pre-date anything being said today. Listening to CRT thinkers can help us rediscover our own tools, rather than simply using theirs.<sup>60</sup>

## 5. Giving clear witness.

When working for justice in the world, Christians must not go incognito. When we are being "salt and light" the goal is that, seeing your good deeds, others may "glorify your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:14-16; 1 Peter 2:12). That can't happen if people don't know about your faith. We do justice not only for its own sake, but for Christ's and the gospel's sake. How can we maintain a clear witness when working for justice?

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who argues that interest convergence cannot explain the Wilberforce-led repeal of the slave trade in Britain.

<sup>60</sup> **Biblical social-critical tools.** (a) *Biblical teaching on sin.* The Christian doctrine of sin, as idolatrous self-interest, is itself a critical tool for social analysis. David Chappell shows how African-American Civil Rights leaders rejected the gradualism of northern liberals who counseled patience. Instead, they pushed forward with demonstrations and civil disobedience. Chappell argues that it was because they had a much more biblical understanding of sin, and they believed that white people, because of their self-interest, would not give up Jim Crow laws without pressure. In short, MLK, Jr. was using the Christian doctrine of sin as a critical tool to see and deal with racism, but it was not the reductionistic CRT tool that assumed that no one can ever act apart from self-interest. The Christian tool allows for the possibility of redemption and grace. See Chappell, *A Stone of Hope: Prophetic Religion and the End of Jim Crow*, University of North Carolina, 2005. (b) *Biblical teaching on the power of words.* Likewise the CRT tool of "structural determinism" (Delgado, 31-39) is dependent on postmodern ideas about how discourse or language creates and determines reality. Again, because it is reductionistic, the CRT approach ultimately denies the very idea of truth. In this view, words create reality, they don't just distort it. Yet the CRT discussions can help Christians get in touch with the somewhat corresponding biblical tool for analysis, namely the power of words—as detailed in the book of Proverbs. In a universe created by a God who speaks and who saves us through One called "the Word of God," it makes sense that words would be enormously powerful and could be a great force for evil. But if the power of words comes from a Creator God who speaks, then that same God gives us a basis for belief that there is real truth. The biblical teaching on the tongue acknowledges the power of words and discourse—without undermining the concept of objective truth (see Bavinck, *Christian Worldview*, 38-55). (c) *Summary.* So indeed Christians can learn from CRT thinkers, if we do not adopt their world-view or even, formally, their tools, but if we rather humbly listen to see if they can show us realities we should have been seeing with our own biblical critical tools, but did not. For far more on how the Bible itself gives us a host of "tools for cultural critique" see Christopher Watkin, *Thinking Through Creation: Genesis 1 and 2 as Tools of Cultural Critique*, Presbyterian and Reformed, 2017 and his website <https://christopherwatkin.com/> For another example of using biblical social-critical tools, see how Esau McCaulley uses Romans 13 and Luke 3 to uncover a biblical "theology of policing" which can be a critical tool for seeking police reform in our own time. McCaulley, *Reading While Black*, Chapter 2 "Freedom is No Fear: The New Testament and a Theology of Policing."

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First, witness entails humble listening (see above). No one will respect Christians if they just haughtily denounce those who disagree with them. If we correct, we do it gently (2 Timothy 2:24-25). If we do nothing but argue and despise opponents, we miss an enormous evangelistic opportunity.

Second, Christian witness entails *not* having the Christian church or faith so closely tied to one or more political parties and leaders that it appears to the world to be nothing but another political power-bloc (see below).

Third, while treating all allies and partners as equals, we should also respectfully point out the problems of secular views of justice. Many scholars argue convincingly not only that liberal and progressive values came from the Bible, but that today's secular society can no longer give people the incentives to make the sacrifices of money and power necessary to create a more just society. Modern culture does not have the moral sources to support its moral ideals, such as human rights and care for the poor.<sup>61</sup>

***While the institutional church's first responsibility is to evangelize and disciple through the Word of God—that discipling and training must motivate and equip Christians to do justice or it is not true to the Word of God.***

Some Christians counter that believers should not argue for the truth of their view of justice, but should simply live out their particular tradition as a witness to the world. But it need not be either-or. Alasdair MacIntyre says that only if we reject both liberal individualism *and* Marxism will we have “a rationally and morally defensible standpoint from which to judge and to act.”<sup>62</sup> If we only “live out” biblical justice, but do not show

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<sup>61</sup> See Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Harvard, 2007, Christian Smith, *Atheist Overreach: What Atheism Can't Deliver*, Oxford, 2018, and Tom Holland, *Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World*, Basic, 2019.

<sup>62</sup> **We don't just live out biblical justice, but we also argue for it in the public square.** Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, Notre Dame, 2007, xiii. MacIntyre, despite being one of the most prominent contemporary thinkers to argue that all the justice theories from Marxism to Libertarianism are faith-based, historically conditioned traditions—and not rational, objective, provable frameworks—nonetheless denies that we can't rationally and morally judge between these traditions. In his “Prologue” to the 3<sup>rd</sup> edition of *After Virtue*, he explains that a tradition or framework can be found wanting on its own terms by showing how it must smuggle values into its framework from other views. This is basically Bavinck's point, that all non-Christian worldviews are reductionistic and cannot account for all we intuitively know about reality. See “Prologue”, in *After Virtue*, 2007, ix-xvi.

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its better foundations, we tacitly support the relativism that has created the spiritual vacuum in the heart of our fragmenting culture.<sup>63</sup>

## 6. Being political but not partisan.

One of the many reasons for the decline of church-going and religion in the U.S. is that increasingly Christians are seen as highly partisan foot-soldiers for political movements. This is both divisive within the church and discrediting out in the world. Many Christians publicly disown and attack other believers who share the same beliefs in Christ, but who are voting for the “wrong” candidates. They seem to feel a more common bond with people of the same politics than of the same faith. When the church as a whole is no longer seen as speaking to questions that transcend politics, and when it is no longer united by a common faith that transcends politics, then the world sees strong evidence that Nietzsche, Freud, and Marx were right, that religion is really just a cover for people wanting to get their way in the world.<sup>64</sup> Paul insists that Christians must not let legal or political differences supersede their oneness in Christ (1 Corinthians 6:6-7).<sup>65</sup>

On the other hand, it is no real option to insist that Christians be “a-political.” To say that Christians should do nothing politically is a vote for the status quo of a society, and our doctrine of sin means that no society is without its injustices.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> **The emptiness of liberalism.** The old liberalism created an enormous vacuum at the heart of people and society. It provides nothing but a formal commitment to individual freedom and so there is no shared story that binds all citizens together, no shared values, no sense of belonging. Much of the impetus behind the new Progressivism seems to be a way that younger people are trying to get back a moral compass and a sense of solidarity that has been lost under liberalism. For a book length case for this view, see Patrick Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed*, Yale, 2019.

<sup>64</sup> This term “political but not partisan” is taken from Ross Douthat, *Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics*, Free Press, 2018, 284. He makes an extended case that the political polarization between Left and Right drew many churches into it and that in turn discredited religion in general throughout our culture. Mainline Protestant clergy were drawn into political liberalism while evangelicals seem to have become both agents and instruments of conservative political policy. See also Robert Putnam, *American Grace: How Religion Unites and Divides Us*, Simon and Schuster, 2010.

<sup>65</sup> The words of Paul in 1 Corinthians 6, though not addressing an identical situation, are relevant here. Paul condemns Christians going to civil court against each other. It discredits the faith because Christians are allowing legal and political differences to be more basic to their identity than their common union with Christ. Paul says: “One brother takes another to court—in front of unbelievers. The very fact that you have lawsuits among you means you have been completely defeated already. Why not be wronged? Why not rather be cheated?” (1 Corinthians 6:6-7).

<sup>66</sup> **Neither a politicized nor privatized Christianity.** A relevant quote from Herman Bavinck, *Essays on Religion, Science, and Society*, Baker, 2008. Some say that Christianity is basically a political program: “Christianity, they say, is born from the social needs of the time...After all, [they say] all spiritual ideas and powers in state and church, religion and society, science and art are caused ultimately and fundamentally by social conditions in the manner in which material goods are produced and distributed .

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What should be done? First, Christians should avoid accepting the “ethical package deals”<sup>67</sup> that political parties force on their members. While the Bible speaks a great deal about racial and economic justice (which “sounds liberal”), its teaching on sex and the family “sounds conservative.” Being true to this biblical “package” of social issues will prevent believers from fitting completely into any current political categories.

Second, Christians should recognize that biblical justice tells us *that* we must help the poor and the weak, but it does not dictate *how*. Believers who have the same faith and same commitments may go about doing justice in different ways across the political spectrum. They should respect each other’s differences as they go about their work.

Third, Christians should not see non-partisanship as “centrism”—some “split the difference” moderate position between two poles. When faced with two alternatives on the world’s spectrum of thought, such as rationalism and empiricism, monism and naturalism, legalism and antinomianism, Christianity critiques each fundamentally, but does not ignore the common grace insights of either. Rather it arrives at a position *off* the spectrum which Christopher Watkin calls “biblical diagonalization.”<sup>68</sup>

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.. The gospel that he came to bring was therefore a Gospel for the poor. Jesus was the first socialist ... He always spoke in defense of the poor and against the wealthy. ... Christianity must become socially minded or disappear” (119-120). Others insist that Christianity is just about spiritual matters. “Others ... believe ... the Christian religion has nothing to do with society and the state and that it has no message for either. ... The interests of society did not concern [Jesus] in the least, nor did He have anything to do with the state, just as He was totally indifferent to all of culture. Religion and morality are on the one side, and society, state and culture are on the other; each live in their own lives and follow their own course. Religion’s place is in the heart, the inner chamber, the church; but politics and the economy go their own way and, as such, have nothing to do with religion” (120). But Bavinck concludes: “...the Gospel tests all things—all circumstances and relationships—against the will of God, just as in the days of Moses and the prophets, of Christ and the apostles. It considers everything...from the angle in which all those circumstances and relationships are connected with moral principles that God has instituted for all of life. Precisely because the Gospel only opposes sin, it opposes it only and everywhere in the heart and in the head, in the eye and in the hand, in family and in society, in science and art, in government and subjects, in rich and poor, for all sin is unrighteousness, trespassing of God’s law, and corruption of nature. But by liberating all social circumstances and relationships from sin, the Gospel tries to restore them all according to the will of God and make them fulfill their own nature” (143).

<sup>67</sup> James Mumford, *Vexed: Ethics Beyond Political Tribes*, London: Bloomsbury, 2020.

<sup>68</sup> **A ‘Middle Way’? No.** Those arguing that biblical justice critiques the theories and ideologies of both the Right and the Left—are often assumed to be “centrist” or “moderates” who are looking for a “Middle Way.” In these articles, I am not doing that at all. The way that the Christian worldview interacts with its alternatives is not by ‘splitting the difference’ and coming to some halfway position between them. Christopher Watkin argues that Christianity instead “diagonalizes” the alternatives. “To diagonalize a choice...is to refuse the two (or more) alternatives it offers and elaborate a position that is neither reducible nor utterly unrelated to them” (*Thinking Through Creation: Genesis 1 and 2 as Tools of Cultural Critique*, Presbyterian and Reformed, 2017,28). Here is an example. In Romans, Paul shows us both



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## 7. Liberating the conscience.

It is common in public discourse today for Christians to say that a “real” Christian *must* vote for someone or *must not* vote for someone. Historically this is called “binding the conscience.” But the Westminster Confession’s Chapter 20 is “Of Christian Liberty and Liberty of Conscience.” Paragraph 2 states: “God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men” which are either “contrary to his Word” or even “beside it.” A rule “beside God’s Word” may not contradict anything in the Bible. It may even be—in some people’s view—a good inference, but it is nonetheless *not* something that God’s word directly teaches. In Matthew 15:1-5, 9 Jesus condemns the religious leaders who added human rules to biblical ones and required obedience to them all alike.

The Confession concludes that in any area where the Bible has not bound human consciences—has not spoken directly—Christians are free to determine God’s wisdom

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legalists (those who sought to save themselves by their righteousness – Romans 9:31) and antinomians (those who lived without God and as they saw fit – Romans 1:18ff.) Is the gospel a half-way point, a moderate middle way between the two alternatives? Not at all. Legalists are concerned about moral compromise and about any failure to obey God’s moral law. Antinomians are concerned about self-righteousness, cultural rigidity, and a lack of loving motivation from inside the heart. The gospel, of course, radically critiques both positions, and yet, at the very same time, it fulfills the concerns of each position better than the positions can themselves. “We are saved by faith alone but not by a faith that remains alone.” That is, we are saved by faith alone, not by a good life (versus legalism). But true saving faith always inevitably results in a changed life with new motivation to obey God’s law. In short, the Bible “diagonalizes” alternatives. It does not find a mid-point on the spectrum between them. It is a position off the human spectrum, yet one that addresses the concerns of those on the spectrum. When biblical justice critiques both the individualism of the Right and the collectivism of the Left, or the relativism of Liberals, yet the rigid moralism of the Progressives, it is not offering a Middle Way, but something altogether different.

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and will for them. Churches and other Christians should not demand obedience where the Bible has left the conscience free. I personally know many Christians who are Democrats or Republicans out of conscience. And they are free to arrive at that position. But they should not then turn and violate other Christians' liberty by trying to bind their consciences to the same conclusions.<sup>69</sup>

## 8. Going local.

I suggest (but not binding your consciences!) that Christians work more locally than nationally on justice matters. It is also better to focus on particular issues of injustice rather than entering heavily into general “national conversations” about it. In many places in the western world our national political institutions are no longer functioning. They are too polarized to forge laws through compromises that involve the greatest number of people and constituencies. This has been their work for centuries, but today they have become “platforms” for individual leaders to speak to their base and press their agendas rather than cooperate with others.<sup>70</sup> National-level politics is largely broken, and entering into “national conversations” through social media tends to simply virtue-signal rather than accomplish anything. By contrast, there are many specific issues that can be worked on systemically or locally. Locally, people are more willing to cooperate across lines for specific ends.

## 9. Embracing complexity.

One of the great strengths of biblical justice is that it does not attribute injustice to just one main factor. Many white American evangelicals, however, have a highly

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<sup>69</sup> **Christian freedom of conscience in politics.** The Confession goes on to say about extra- or non-biblical rules: “to believe such doctrines, or to obey such commands, out of conscience, is to betray true liberty of conscience: and the requiring of an implicit faith, and an absolute and blind obedience, is to destroy liberty of conscience, and reason also.” So, while the Bible binds my conscience to care for the poor, it does not tell me the best practical way to do it. Any particular strategy (high taxes and government services vs low taxes and private charity) may be good and wise—and may even be somewhat inferred from other things the Bible teaches. But they are not directly commanded and therefore we cannot insist that all Christians, as a matter of conscience, follow one or the other. The Bible binds my conscience to love the immigrant, but it doesn't tell me how many legal immigrants to admit to the U.S. every year. It does not exactly prescribe immigration policy. Also, the Bible tells me that abortion is a sin and great evil, but it doesn't tell me the best way to decrease or end abortion in this country. The current political parties offer a potpourri of different positions on these and many, many other topics, most of which, as just noted, the Bible does not speak to directly. This means when it comes to taking political positions, voting, determining alliances and political involvement, the Christian has liberty of conscience. In the Confession's view, Christians cannot say to other Christians “no Christian can vote for...” or “every Christian must vote for...” unless you can find a Biblical command to that effect.

<sup>70</sup> See Yuval Levin, *A Time to Build: From Family and Community to Congress and the Campus, How Recommitting to Our Institutions Can Revive the American Dream*, Basic Books, 2020. See especially Chapter 3 – “We the People”, 45-68.

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individualistic worldview, and confine the idea of racism to deliberate, individual attitudes and actions of racial hate.<sup>71</sup> On the other hand, Critical Race Theory sees all racial disparities as caused by structural, systemic factors. As we saw above, biblical justice does neither, and an example of 'embracing complexity' is found in Anthony Bradley's book *Ending Overcriminalization and Mass Incarceration*. Bradley does an analysis of the criminal justice system in the U.S. and finds it unjust at many points, but what to do? His last two chapters are telling. They are: "Toward Structural Solutions at the State Level" and "Toward Civil Society Solutions."<sup>72</sup>

"Civil society" refers to the host of groups and associations that are run neither by government nor by commerce and the marketplace. They are 'mediating structures' like the family itself, churches, synagogues and mosques, and many neighborhood and other non-governmental organizations.<sup>73</sup> Conservatives typically insist on civil society solutions for poverty and injustice rather than government social policy, and liberals and progressives put all the emphasis on social policy. Christians, because of their understanding of biblical justice, can embrace the complexity of injustice and use a range of solutions.<sup>74</sup>

## 10. Learning from Christian leaders of color.

We said above that it is crucial for doing justice and for witness, to listen to non-Christian thinkers. It is even more important for white Christians to listen to brothers and sisters of color, who inevitably see our society from a very different perspective than white people do.<sup>75</sup> We are all united by the truth of Scripture, but our doctrine of sin teaches us that we come to Scripture with self-justifying hearts and many other emotional and cultural blinders, and so we often miss things that the Bible is saying to us. Experience can change this.

When I was diagnosed with cancer and my life was threatened by it, I began to see things in familiar biblical passages that I had before overlooked. Why? *You only get answers from*

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<sup>71</sup> Christian Smith and Michael O. Emerson, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America*, Oxford, 2000.

<sup>72</sup> See Anthony Bradley's book *Ending Overcriminalization and Mass Incarceration*, Cambridge, 2018, 150-199.

<sup>73</sup> See Peter L. Berger and Richard John Neuhaus, *To Empower People: From State to Civil Society*, 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition, American Enterprise Institute, 1996.

<sup>74</sup> One other solution in the realm of criminal justice is what has been called "Restorative Justice". It has many Christian proponents who see it as more in line with principles of biblical justice. See Daniel W. Van Ness and Karen Heetderks Strong, *Restoring Justice: An Introduction to Restorative Justice*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition, LexisNexus, 2010.

<sup>75</sup> For my own journey on this subject see my introduction to Irwyn Ince's *The Beautiful Community*, noted above.

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*the Bible to the questions you ask of it, and a man with cancer asks different questions of a Bible passage than one without it. Non-white Christians in the U.S. have a sharply different experience of life here in many ways, and so they can show white Christians things in the Bible we have missed.*

If you are white, how do you start with this? First, reach out to Christian leaders of color in your own denomination and also in your own city. Secondly, read the books and works of Christian leaders of color. White Christians don't usually know where to start, but if you have reached out within your denomination and city, your new friends and colleagues can give you sources. A very select list of those who have helped me (when I was younger) are Martin Luther King, Jr., John Perkins, and Carl Ellis. Some more recently helpful have been Justo Gonzalez, Esau McCaulley, and Anthony Bradley.<sup>76</sup>

***You only get answers from the Bible to the questions you ask of it, and a man with cancer asks different questions of a Bible passage than one without it. Non-white Christians in the U.S. have a sharply different experience of life here in many ways, and so they can show white Christians things in the Bible we have missed.***

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<sup>76</sup> See Martin Luther King Jr, *Strength to Love*, Fortress, 2010; Martin Luther King, Jr. "Loving Your Enemies," Sermon delivered at the Detroit Council of Churches' Noon Lenten Services, March 7, 1961, Detroit, MI. <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/loving-your-enemies-sermon-delivered-detroit-council-churches-noon-lenten>; Martin Luther King, Jr., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King Jr.*, ed. James M. Washington (San Francisco: Harper, 1986); Martin Luther King, "I have a Dream" Address, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/i-have-dream-address-delivered-march-washington-jobs-and-freedom>; Martin Luther King, Jr. "The Christian Doctrine of Man," Sermon delivered at the Detroit Council of Churches' Noon Lenten Services, March 12, 1958; <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/christian-doctrine-man-sermon-delivered-detroit-council-churches-noon-lenten#ftnref6>; John M. Perkins, *Let Justice Roll Down*, Baker, 2012, and *Beyond Charity: The Call to Christian Community Development*, Baker, 1993; Carl Ellis, *Free At Last? The Gospel in the African-American Experience*, IVP, 2020; Esau McCaulley, *Reading While Black*, noted above; Anthony B. Bradley, *Aliens in the Promised Land: Why Minority Leadership is Overlooked in White Christian Churches and Institutions*, Presbyterian and Reformed, 2013 and *Ending Overcriminalization and Mass Incarceration*, noted above; Justo L. Gonzalez, *Manana: Christian Theology from a Hispanic Perspective*, Abingdon, 1990. All these voices have been helpful to me as a white man for learning both what the Bible teaches and how to love my non-white neighbor. Not all these thinkers share all my conservative evangelical doctrinal beliefs.

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Christianity has a unique theological and psychological identity that made it the first multi-ethnic religion.<sup>77</sup> Christianity is growing across the world among Africans, Asians, and Latin Americans. The future of Christianity in the West lies with multi-ethnic leadership, though many whites have been slow to see it. Yet even today in European and North American cities there are literally thousands of new churches and missions beginning under the leadership of African, Latin American, and Asian Christians. And many of them have been pointing to injustice long before it became cool to do so.

## 11. Tackling the elephant.

When we talk about injustice, the “elephant in the room” is—how do we define systemic racism? The phrase “systemic” or “structural” racism has been around for many years, but it seems like half the country has just discovered it and many use it indiscriminately. There are wildly divergent definitions and applications of the term. There is an enormous divide between progressives and conservatives over the nature of it, and white American Christians in particular tend to have trouble accepting the very concept.<sup>78</sup> This article has

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<sup>77</sup> **Christian identity and our attitude toward race and culture.** Before Christianity, one’s religion came to you automatically with your race. Why? Because every nation or ethnic group had its own god(s)—and so race and nationality was your most fundamental identity. Your religion was just derivative from that. But Christianity taught that God was the God of all peoples, and that people from every nation could and should worship and know him. It taught that one should choose to believe in the Christian God regardless of nationality, and that meant that one’s relationship with God was more fundamental than one’s race. As Larry Hurtado says: “[Christians’]...ethnic, social, and gender distinctions are to be regarded as relativized radically, [for] all believers of whatever ethnic, sexual, or social class are now ‘one in Christ Jesus’.” But...Paul did not treat these distinctions as actually effaced. So for example...he persisted in referring to himself proudly as a member of his ancestral people, a “Hebrew” and an “Israelite”...but he also insisted that “in Christ”...these distinctions were no longer to be regarded as *defining* believers in the ways that they had functioned before.” Larry W. Hurtado, *Destroyer of the gods: Early Christian Distinctiveness in the Roman World*, Baylor, 2016, 93. In short, Christians’ identity was more rooted in their faith in Christ than in their culture or race. This gave them two advantages: (a) It gave them an ability to see their culture and critique it, and (b) it gave them the ability to learn from and listen to Christians from other races and cultures.

<sup>78</sup> **The individualistic and privatistic views of white evangelicalism.** Christian Smith and Michael O. Emerson, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America*, Oxford, 2000. See chapters “Color Blind” and “Controlling One’s Own Destiny”, 69-114. White Christians in Britain and America tend to have a deep confidence in their own objectivity and their ability to control their own destiny through their own choices. They find it hard to accept how strongly they are influenced and shaped by presuppositions, culture, and social structures. They consider their beliefs simply “obvious”—things that “any rational person should be able to see.” They don’t see how much faith assumptions (that cannot be proven rationally) underlie their views, even those purported to be scientific, rational, and empirical. This is the influence of “Scottish common sense realism” that has been well documented by Nathan O. Hatch in *The Democratization of American Christianity*, Yale, 1989, by George Marsden in *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism 1870-1925*. Oxford, 1980 and by Mark Noll in *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, Eerdmans, 1994.

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made the case that the Bible does recognize corporate or systemic evil and responsibility, as well as the reality of discrete social systems that are unjust and that must be challenged by Christians (such as the patronage system in Luke 14 and manstealing and slavery in 1 Timothy 1). But what are the structures today that Christians should challenge? Orthodox Protestant Christian believers need to gather across racial and class lines to come up with a Protestant version of Catholic Social Teaching in which we biblically speak about systemic racism in our society today.

To start, consider some category distinctions. First there were *past* social structures that very deliberately sought to crush and marginalize African-Americans, such as slavery, the Jim Crow laws, and the systematic exclusion of Blacks from access to capital and mortgages, as well as access to education and housing. Although these are now legally abolished, their on-going effects are powerful and they require a mix of structural and civil society responses to remove those effects.

Second, there are present day *formal* social structures that disadvantage the poor and people of color, such as (in my opinion) the way public schools are funded and operated, the way the criminal justice system privileges people with money and connections, some of the ways policing is done, the way a great deal of land-use zoning is done and housing is built and financed, and the way the health care system privileges some over others.

Finally, there are the *informal* social systems that are the cumulative effects of (what we noted above is) the white majority's distrust of and devaluation of non-white cultures. So we tend to recommend and hire people inside our trusted, informal relational networks that usually consist exclusively of people like us. That means otherwise qualified but non-white people have no way to enter the circles where there is the most social, financial, and cultural capital. This also influences how teachers, doctors, bankers, police, and business owners treat non-white people. The effect (even if unknowingly) is to hold non-white people down educationally, psychologically, economically and physically.

## 12. Transforming power.

I end this long article by merely repeating how I ended the last article. You cannot do justice without recognizing how power has been used to exploit and abuse, but you also cannot do justice without exerting power yourself.<sup>79</sup> The gospel shows us a Savior who

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<sup>79</sup> **A biblical theory of power.** Because Marxists and the Progressive Left talk so incessantly about power, Christians are far too ready to simply ignore it in their social criticism. But as we have seen, the Bible gives us social-critical tools for recognizing power and its misuse. Some books to read: Andy Crouch, *Playing God: Redeeming the Gift of Power*, IVP, 2013; David T. Koyzis, *We Answer to Another: Authority, Office, and the Image of God*, Wipf and Stock, 2014; Kyle A. Pasewark, *A Theology of Power: Being Beyond Domination*, Fortress, 1993; David Swartz, *Culture and Power: The Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu*, University of Chicago, 1997; Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other*

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does indeed exercise authority over us, but who uses that authority and power only to serve us, and who was willing to lose it and suffer in order to save us. Christians have intellectual and heart resources to use power in a way that does not exploit. We must never stop struggling to walk in our Savior's steps.<sup>80</sup>

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<https://quarterly.gospelinlife.com/justice-in-the-bible/>

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*Writings*, 1972-1977; Steven Lukes, *Power: A Radical View*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, St Martins Press, 2005; Isaac Ariail Reed, *Power in Modernity: Agency Relations and the Creative Destruction of the King's Two Bodies*, University of Chicago Press, 2020. Also see Christopher Watkin's *Michel Foucault*, Presbyterian and Reformed, 2018 as well as his unpublished manuscript *Thinking Through the Bible*.

<sup>80</sup> For the basic idea in this final section on Christianity and power, I am indebted to Christopher Watkin. See his *Michel Foucault*, Presbyterian and Reformed, 2018.