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INTRODUCTION



WHY WRITE THIS BOOK?

Unrolling the scroll, he found the place where it is written: The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners.

Luke 4:17–18

These are the words Jesus read in the synagogue in Nazareth when he announced the beginning of his ministry. He identified himself as the “Servant of the Lord,” prophesied by Isaiah, who would “bring justice” to the world (Isaiah 42:1–7). Most people know that Jesus came to bring forgiveness and grace. Less well known is the Biblical teaching that a true experience of the grace of Jesus Christ inevitably motivates a man or woman to seek justice in the world.

While I was working on this volume, I heard two

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questions from friends: “Who are you writing this for?” and “How did you come to be interested in the subject of justice?” The answers to these questions are a good way to introduce the book’s themes.

Who Is This Book For?

There are four kinds of people who I hope will read this book. There is a host of young Christian believers who respond with joy to the call to care for the needy. Volunteerism is the distinguishing mark of an entire generation of American college students and recent graduates. The *NonProfit Times* reports that teens and young adults are leading “enormous spikes in applications to volunteer programs.” Alan Solomont, chairman of the board of the Corporation for National and Community Service, says that “[this] younger generation . . . is more interested in service than other generations.”¹ Volunteering rates among young adults dropped off significantly in the 1970s and 1980s, but “current youngsters grew up in schools that were more likely to have service learning programs . . . starting young people on a path of community service much earlier than before.”²

As a pastor whose church is filled with young adults, I have seen this concern for social justice, but I also see many who do not let their social concern affect their

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personal lives. It does not influence how they spend money on themselves, how they conduct their careers, the way they choose and live in their neighborhoods, or whom they seek as friends. Also, many lose enthusiasm for volunteering over time.

From their youth culture they have imbibed not only an emotional resonance for social justice but also a consumerism that undermines self-denial and delayed gratification. Popular youth culture in Western countries cannot bring about the broad change of life in us that is required if we are to make a difference for the poor and marginalized. While many young adults have a Christian faith, and also a desire to help people in need, these two things are not actually connected to each other in their lives. They have not thought out the implications of Jesus's gospel for doing justice in all aspects of life. That connection I will attempt to make in this book.

Justice and the Bible

Another kind of person who I hope will read this book approaches the subject of "doing justice" with suspicion. In the twentieth century the American church divided between the liberal mainline that stressed social justice and the fundamentalist churches that emphasized personal salvation. One of the founders of the

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Social Gospel movement was Walter Rauschenbusch, a German Baptist minister whose first pastorate was on the edge of New York City's Hell's Kitchen in the 1880s. His firsthand acquaintance with the terrible poverty of his neighborhood led him to question traditional evangelism, which took pains to save people's souls but did nothing about the social systems locking them into poverty. Rauschenbusch began to minister to "both soul and body," but in tandem with this shift in method came a shift in theology. He rejected the traditional doctrines of Scripture and atonement. He taught that Jesus did not need to satisfy the justice of God, and therefore he died only to be an example of unselfishness.³

In the mind of many orthodox Christians, therefore, "doing justice" is inextricably linked with the loss of sound doctrine and spiritual dynamism. However, Jonathan Edwards, the eighteenth-century author of the sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," was a staunch Calvinist and hardly anyone's idea of a "liberal." Yet in his discourse on "The Duty of Charity to the Poor," he concluded, "Where have we any command in the Bible laid down in stronger terms, and in a more peremptory urgent manner, than the command of giving to the poor?"⁴

Unlike Rauschenbusch, Edwards argued that you did not have to change the classic Biblical doctrine of

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salvation to do ministry to the poor. On the contrary, such ministry flows directly out of historic evangelical teaching. He saw involvement with the poor and classic Biblical doctrine as indissolubly intertwined. That combination is relatively rare today, but it shouldn't be. I am writing this book for people who don't see yet what Edwards saw, namely, that when the Spirit enables us to understand what Christ has done for us, the result is a life poured out in deeds of justice and compassion for the poor.⁵

Others who I hope will give this book a hearing are the younger evangelicals who have “expanded their mission” to include social justice along with evangelism.⁶ Many of them have not only turned away from older forms of ministry, but also from traditional evangelical doctrines of Jesus's substitutionary atonement and of justification by faith alone, which are seen as too “individualistic.”⁷ These authors usually argue that changes in theological emphasis—or perhaps outright changes in theological doctrine—are necessary if the church is going to be more engaged in the pursuit of social justice. The scope of the present volume prevents us from looking at these debates about atonement and justification. However, one of its main purposes is to show that such reengineering of doctrine is not only mistaken in itself, but also unnecessary. The most traditional formulation of evangelical doctrine, rightly

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understood, should lead its proponents to a life of doing justice in the world.

There is a fourth group of people who should find this book of interest. Recently there has been a rise in books and blogs charging that religion, to quote Christopher Hitchens, “poisons everything.”⁸ In their view religion, and especially the Christian church, is a primary force promoting injustice and violence on our planet. To such people the idea that belief in the Biblical God necessarily entails commitment to justice is absurd. But, as we will see, the Bible is a book devoted to justice in the world from first to last. And the Bible gives us not just a naked call to care about justice, but gives us everything we need—motivation, guidance, inner joy, and power—to live a just life.

I have identified four groups of readers who seem at first glance to be very different, but they are not. They all fail at some level to see that the Biblical gospel of Jesus necessarily and powerfully leads to a passion for justice in the world. A concern for justice in all aspects of life is neither an artificial add-on nor a contradiction to the message of the Bible.

Why Am I Interested in Justice?

How did I get interested in this subject? Practicing justice did not come naturally to me as a child. Grow-

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ing up, I shunned the only child I knew well who was poor—Jeffrey, a boy in my elementary and middle-school classes who lived “under the Eighth Street Bridge.” In my school’s tightly ordered social system, there were the Insiders and Uncool Outsiders. Then there was Jeffrey, in a category by himself. His clothes were ill-fitting thrift store garments, and he smelled bad. He was mocked mercilessly, excluded from games and conversations, and penalized in classwork, since few wanted to cooperate with him on assignments and projects. I confess that I avoided him most of the time because I was one of the Uncool Outsiders and was hoping to improve my social status. Instead of identifying with Jeffrey and recognizing the injustice of how he was being treated, I turned on the only kid who was more of a social outsider than I was.⁹

When I entered college in the late 1960s, however, I became part of a generation of students transfixed by the Civil Rights Movement. I learned about the systematic violence that was being carried out against blacks and civil rights workers in the South. I remember being especially astonished by the image of James Meredith being gunned down in broad daylight on a voting rights march in 1966, with his assailant calmly looking on in one of the photographs. I was amazed that something as unjust as segregation could have been so easily rationalized by an entire society. It

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marked the first time I realized that most older white adults in my life were telling me things that were dead wrong. The problem was not just a “few troublemakers.” Black people *did* have a right to demand the redress and rectifying of many wrongs.

“You’re a Racist, You Know”

Although I had grown up going to church, Christianity began to lose its appeal to me when I was in college. One reason for my difficulty was the disconnect between my secular friends who supported the Civil Rights Movement, and the orthodox Christian believers who thought that Martin Luther King, Jr. was a threat to society. Why, I wondered, did the nonreligious believe so passionately in equal rights and justice, while the religious people I knew could not have cared less?

A breakthrough came when I discovered a small but thoughtful group of devout Christian believers who were integrating their faith with every kind of justice in society. At first I merely imported my views on racial justice and added them onto the theology I was learning as a Christian. I didn’t see what later I came to realize, that in fact the Bible provides the very basis for justice. I learned that the creation account in Genesis was the origin for the idea of human rights in

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the West¹⁰ and that Biblical prophetic literature rang with calls for justice. Years afterward I discovered that the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and '60s I so admired was grounded much more in the African-American church's Christian views of sin and salvation than in secularism.¹¹

When I went to seminary to prepare for the ministry, I met an African-American student, Elward Ellis, who befriended both my future wife, Kathy Kristy, and me. He gave us gracious but bare-knuckled mentoring about the realities of injustice in American culture. "You're a racist, you know," he once said at our kitchen table. "Oh, you don't mean to be, and you don't want to be, but you are. You can't really help it." He said, for example, "When black people do things in a certain way, you say, 'Well, that's your culture.' But when white people do things in a certain way, you say, 'That's just the *right* way to do things.' You don't realize you really have a culture. You are blind to how many of your beliefs and practices are cultural." We began to see how, in so many ways, we made our cultural biases into moral principles and then judged people of other races as being inferior. His case was so strong and fair that, to our surprise, we agreed with him.

While I was in my first pastorate in Hopewell, Virginia, I decided to enroll in a doctor of ministry

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program, and my project (the “thesis” of the course) was on training deacons. In Presbyterian church organization there are two sets of officers—elders and deacons. Deacons had historically been designated to work with the poor and needy in the community, but over the years this legacy had been lost, and instead they had evolved into janitors and treasurers. My program advisor challenged me to study the history of the office and to develop ways to help Presbyterian churches recover this lost aspect of their congregational life.

I took the assignment, and it was a transformative process for me. I went to the social work department of a nearby university, got the full reading list for their foundational courses, and devoured all the books. I did historical research on how church deacons served as the first public social service structure in European cities such as Geneva, Amsterdam, and Glasgow. I devised courses of skill-training for deacons and wrote material to help church leaders get a vision not only for the “word” ministry of preaching and teaching, but also for “deed” ministry, serving people with material and economic needs.¹²

After my pastorate in Virginia, I went to teach at Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia. In my department were four faculty members who lived in the inner city and taught urban ministry. Each week I would go

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to the department meeting a bit early and have fifteen minutes or so alone talking with the chairman, Harvie Conn. Harvie was passionately committed to living and working in the city, and he was keenly aware of the systemic injustice in our society. As I look back on those times, I realize I was learning far more from him than at the time I thought I was. I read his little book *Evangelism: Doing Justice and Preaching Grace*¹³ twenty-five years ago and its themes sank deep into my thinking about God and the church.

Inspired by Harvie's teaching and by all the experiences I had in urban churches in Philadelphia during the 1980s, I answered an invitation to move to the middle of New York City in 1989 and begin a new congregation, Redeemer Presbyterian Church.

On Grace and Being Just

There are many great differences between the small southern town of Hopewell, Virginia, and the giant metropolis of New York. But there was one thing that was exactly the same. To my surprise, there is a direct relationship between a person's grasp and experience of God's grace, and his or her heart for justice and the poor. In both settings, as I preached the classic message that God does *not* give us justice but saves us by free grace, I discovered that those most affected

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by the message became the most sensitive to the social inequities around them. One man in my church in Hopewell, Easley Shelton, went through a profound transformation. He moved out of a sterile, moralistic understanding of life and began to understand that his salvation was based on the free, unmerited grace of Jesus. It gave him a new warmth, joy, and confidence that everyone could see. But it had another surprising effect. “You know,” he said to me one day, “I’ve been a racist all my life.” I was startled, because I had not yet preached to him or to the congregation on that subject. He had put it together for himself. When he lost his Phariseeism, his spiritual self-righteousness, he said, he lost his racism.

Elaine Scarry of Harvard has written a fascinating little book called *On Beauty and Being Just*.¹⁴ Her thesis is that the experience of beauty makes us less self-centered and more open to justice. I have observed over the decades that when people see the beauty of God’s grace in Christ, it leads them powerfully toward justice.

This book, then, is both for believers who find the Bible a trustworthy guide and for those who wonder if Christianity is a positive influence in the world. I want the orthodox to see how central to the Scripture’s

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message is justice for the poor and marginalized. I also want to challenge those who do not believe in Christianity to see the Bible not as a repressive text, but as the basis for the modern understanding of human rights. Throughout this book, I will begin each chapter with a call to justice taken directly from the Bible and show how these words can become the foundation of a just, generous human community. I don't expect to bring every reader all the way to agreement, but I do hope to introduce many to a new way of thinking about the Bible, justice, and grace.