



T H E C H U R C H *o f* T H E
RESURRECTION
S E E K I N G *t h e* C I T Y *t o* C O M E

Just Christianity
Lessons on Biblical Justice for Groups

Introduction

And what does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God? Micah 6:8

During my years as a student, there often were optional opportunities, distinct from whatever was required by the teacher, variously presented in terms of “additional reading,” “For further study,” and so on. Of all the thousands of academic assignments I must have completed over the years, I would be shocked to find that I completed more than a dozen that I knew to be optional.

Why didn't I seize more of these learning opportunities? Often I was too busy or too tired. Undoubtedly there were also times when I was simply too lazy. But I suppose more than anything, it's because they weren't required. After all, if the teacher didn't believe these assignments were necessary, why should I do them?

God teaches us throughout his Word that practicing justice isn't optional; it's required. Like worship, prayer, Bible study, and other spiritual disciplines, we must do justice in order to grow as Christians. If God didn't think justice essential, he wouldn't have emphasized it, repeatedly, throughout the Bible. Yet for a host of reasons, justice is often marginalized within evangelical churches. What God declared essential, we have regarded as an elective. In taking care of ourselves, we've neither loved God with our whole heart nor loved our neighbors as ourselves. It's time for repentance and a return to the Lord.

The good news is that God loves for us to return to him. Whenever we do, he runs and embraces us, and then he throws a party (Luke 15:11-32). There's much more joy and hope to be found with the Lord than apart from him. Though it feels utterly counter-intuitive, there's a rich, abundant life waiting for us as we join the Lord in sacrificing our own lives for the sake of those in need.

Over the next several months, we will focus on justice together as a church—in sermons, RezGroups, and many other events and opportunities—as a way of drawing nearer to the Lord. In particular, RezGroups will both study and practice justice. The RezGroup curriculum will first establish the Gospel priority of justice, and then explore some of the complexities involved in the practice of justice at the intersection of the church and secular culture. We'll then propose a way forward and consider how it applies to thorny areas of injustice in our own context. Throughout the study, we'll seek to agree on essentials, and hope to learn from one another whenever we disagree on tactics. In the meantime, there will be important opportunities to practice in the community what we're learning in our groups.

I pray that this justice focus will change both our thinking and our practice as a church. May it be a life-giving, rich season of growth in Christ for us all.

Dan Claire

Just Christianity

Chapter 1: Unity Through God's Story

‘Many people think of the Bible as a book of moral teachings with stories sprinkled through to illustrate the teachings. But it’s a lot better than that...the Bible is a single true story with teachings sprinkled through to illustrate the story.’
-Tim Keller

‘Stories, in contrast to abstract statements of truth, tease us into becoming participants in what is being said. We find ourselves involved in the action. We may start as spectators or critics, but if the story is good (and the biblical stories are very good!), we find ourselves no longer just listening to but inhabiting the story.’
-Eugene Peterson

“Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.”
John 20:30-31

The Challenge of Finding Common Ground

Talking about controversial issues in the church can be difficult, particularly because we come from such a variety of backgrounds. Some of us were never part of a church prior to this one. Others grew up in church but quit attending after leaving home, returning only now as a part of this congregation. Others were formerly involved in churches that were vastly different from ours. Only a small handful grew up in and continue in our particular tradition. The good news is that our congregation is much richer because of the diversity of our individual stories. On the other hand, given our varied backgrounds, how do we find common ground?

When it comes to talking together about justice, this challenge is especially acute because of the mind-boggling breadth of beliefs and practices among Christian churches. Consider these findings of researchers who surveyed attitudes regarding justice among twenty-one churches in a medium-sized college town in the late 1980s.¹ In one Protestant church they visited:

the sanctuary was festooned with posters promoting solidarity with Central American victims of rightist oppression, the minister’s sermon lauded the resistances of women to tyranny throughout history, the explanation of harvest symbols stressed the need to combat poverty and hunger, and the choice of hymns included folk songs from the civil rights era. During the announcement period of the service, several congregants

¹ Kenneth D. Wald; Dennis E. Owen; Samuel S. Hill, Jr. “Churches as Political Communities.” *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 82, No. 2. (Jun., 1988), 531-548.

encouraged their fellow members to attend demonstrations, meetings, and workshops in support of the causes that had received ministerial endorsement. A cursory inspection of the bumper stickers on vehicles parked around the church suggested that a considerable proportion of church members had indeed been active in such liberal organizations.

Meanwhile, in a nearby Protestant church, the pastor's sermon encouraged:

contributions for building a fence around church property. The fence was necessary, he said, to protect against beer parties and other rowdy activities taking place nearby. The church bulletin included a request for volunteers to help staff the local "right-to-life" office. Without formally endorsing either abstention from liquor or antiabortion activities, the church nonetheless conveyed clear social messages.

Note that while the foundational doctrines and the heritage of these churches were similar, their attitudes toward various social and political issues were quite different. Furthermore, it was their tactics with regard to these issues that appeared most important in terms of the culture and identity of the church. In other words, these churches tended to define themselves in terms of their approach to culture.

Very few of us grew up in churches like these, yet we all come with history. We have biases, allegiances and aversions to a wide array of public issues. We also bring our own experiences of sin and separation. None of us is objective. As we gather within our church to talk about justice, it's only natural that we might come with a lot of skepticism about our ability to find common ground. That's okay, because if we're looking for common ground, we'll never find it. It's impossible, given our diverse backgrounds. But there's another way forward, by joining together within a common story.

The Joy of a Common Story

None of us is static. We're all constantly in motion—learning, growing and changing—no matter how old. In school we want to move forward towards completion and graduation. At work we endeavor to move towards deadlines and objectives, promotions and raises. In relationships, we always hope to go deeper. And, of course, in faith, the Lord Jesus calls us to into a life of motion, saying, "Come, follow me." We join the Lord in a *journey* of faith, a lifetime of following him together, which offers us a better alternative than common ground. Following Jesus together affords us the joy of a common story.

As human beings, we're all wired for stories. We know that the world is not as it should be, and so we long for stories about the struggle for justice in a broken world. From *Pride and Prejudice* to *Star Wars*, we love to hear of any triumph of good over evil, whether great or small.

Some of us are great story-tellers; all of us are great "story-livers." The story each of us knows best is our own. We've learned it by living it. But we know other stories, too, and because we do,

we can't help but try to align our own stories—often subconsciously—with others. We all long for happy endings, so we're constantly endeavoring to live stories in which good triumphs over evil.

When it comes to issues like poverty, immigration, criminal justice, and so on, “story” isn't usually the first thing that comes to mind. It's easy to get lost in all the statistics and competing theories regarding the best way forward. But underneath every theory is an implicit story of how good will triumph over a particular area of brokenness in the world. Indeed, every political ideology, every philosophy and every religion contains some implicit narrative of how right will overcome wrong. Because of where we live, and when we live, we're inundated with competing narratives pulling us in every direction. As Stephen Shoemaker says, “Our lives must find their place in some greater story or they will find their place in some lesser story.”

As Jesus' disciples, we're drawn together by the greatest story ever, a story encapsulated in our common acclamation: *Christ has died, Christ is risen, and Christ will come again*. For us, the Christian story cannot be one possible solution to the problems of the world. Rather, it is The Story by which we make sense of all other stories—including our own. Our stories, important as they are, serve as small threads woven into the great tapestry of Jesus' infinitely more important story. Because we love Jesus and we believe his story, we long to align our own stories with his, to make the tapestry complete. As we do so, we experience the joy of a common story, and the blessing of alignment within it. Rather than trying to find common ground, we discard every competing narrative that keeps us from alignment with the common story. That's how we as Christians can not only talk about justice, but also learn to practice it together. Justice is central to The Story that we're believing and living together.

A Common Story...About God

Alignment with the Christian story, however, hasn't ever been easy. The world bombards us with competing narratives imitating the Christian one. In fact, many competing narratives are simply slanted retellings of the Christian story. One version may retell it as the Story of Justice, another the Story of Love, another the Story of Grace. It's hard to discern what's wrong with these retellings, since all are major themes in the Bible. Yet the true story isn't about something—it's about someone. The Christian Story is about God—the God of justice, love and grace.

Justice, love and grace are all *attributes* of God, i.e. characteristics of God as revealed in the Bible. In particular, the Bible presents God in many places as the righteous standard for all justice (Deut 32:4, Neh 9:13, 33; Isa 58:2; John 5:30; 2 Thess 1:6). Who God is, and what he does, inherently defines and demonstrates justice for all the world.

Theologians distinguish between those attributes of God that can or cannot be shared with humans. For example, only God can be omniscient and omnipresent. Justice, on the other hand, is a communicable attribute of God. Consequently, we can and should practice justice because God is just. He is the source of all just laws and all morality. (Isa 28:6; 51:4-5; 61:8; Jer 9:24; 21:12; Ezek 34:16; Ps 37:28; Gen 18:19; Deut 27:19; Jer 22:3). He is also the supreme judge who ultimately decides whether or not we have acted justly in accordance with him.

Yet justice is not God's only attribute. God is also a loving Father, who is merciful and slow to anger (Ex 34:6; Ps 86:15; 103:8; Eph 2:4-5; 1 Cor 1:3). And while God is just, he consistently demonstrates a strong bias toward mercy over judgment (Deut 7:9-10). In fact, it's the tension between justice and mercy that drives the plot of the Bible, not only up to Calvary (*Christ has died, Christ is risen*), but all the way through to the end of the story (*Christ will come again*). Consequently, while the story of the Bible leaves no doubt that God is just, and that justice will someday prevail throughout all the cosmos, nevertheless, the Bible is not The Story of Justice. It is the Story of God. Justice is not the only story; it is one of many themes.

Meanwhile, we live in a culture of competing narratives, and the most important stories today are those in which equality, personal autonomy, and justice are triumphant. Churches are pressured from every side to adopt a slanted reading of the Bible in which one or more of these themes take center stage. For example, some feel compelled to offer what Dietrich Bonhoeffer described as "cheap grace," assuring a heavenly happy ending to all those who ever "accepted Jesus into their hearts," regardless of whether they ever endeavored to follow Jesus as Lord. This is merely the triumph of personal autonomy over the Story of God. Or, in other contexts, there's great social pressure to understand the Bible as the Story of Justice, assuring every person a happy ending of thoroughgoing equality and comprehensive human rights. Such variants are often so close to the Christian story that it's hard to distinguish the difference. But in the end, a slanted retelling turns away from God in order to focus on some good outcome for his creatures. The true Christian Story remains the Story of God all the way through to the end.

Essential Unity, Subsidiary Diversity

Healthy churches are comprised of diverse people who conform themselves to the Story of God. The Apostle Paul often talked about this in his epistles, especially whenever he discussed particular roles for individuals within the church. For example, in Eph 4:7-16, Paul described various leadership responsibilities that were necessary for the church to grow into maturity. But this diversity was a *subsidiary diversity*, because the differences between Christians are minuscule when contrasted with our essential similarities. In the preceding verses of Eph 4:4-6, he listed seven things that comprise our *essential unity*, and none of them are trivial. There's:

- one *body* under the headship of Jesus, depending upon one another for survival and health.
- one Holy Trinity: one *Spirit*, one *Lord*, and one *Father*, at the center of the Story.
- one *baptism*, through which all of us who are Christians entered into God's Story
- one *faith*, those shared beliefs and practices which bind us together within the Story
- and one *hope*, the happy ending when God wipes away every tear and makes all things new.

Living as we do in a diverse, cosmopolitan city, it's hard to imagine being part of a group of people that have so much in common. But that's the great strength of the church. As Christians, no matter where we're from, no matter our skin color or marital status, we're united by these components of The Story. Given that we have so much in common, wouldn't it be absurd for us

not to be together? Unity is one of the greatest gifts God has given us; we must treasure and protect it.

Ground Rules for Future Weeks

So what does all of this mean for us as we begin talking about justice together? Here are some recommended ground rules for the weeks ahead.

1. *King Jesus comes first.* The indisputable message of the Bible is that Christ is Lord. The most important way that we align our own stories with The Story is by pledging and practicing our allegiance to him. No platform or agenda should come close to supplanting Jesus from supreme authority in our lives.
2. *Christian unity is a close second.* The corollary of pledging loyalty to Jesus is showing loyalty to his people, regardless of their other affiliations. Therefore, we must commit to love one another within the church, no exceptions, full stop. If Jesus taught that we should love our enemies (Matthew 5:44), then how much more ought we to love brothers and sisters who happen to be our rhetorical opponents? Any loyalty that we have to strategies or tactics must be secondary to the affection and esteem that we give to every Christian believer, and particularly those within our own church.
3. *Go easy on the church. She's the bride of Christ.* Doing justice is complicated. As we think about the way things ought to be, we will inevitably remember instances when the Church (our congregation included) have gotten it wrong. We should be gentle and charitable in our criticisms, remembering that we're talking about Jesus' bride. We should also be thankful for all the good that's been handed down to us through the saints who've gone before us.
4. *Only God is all-knowing.* We need each other's help to align our own stories with The Story. Before we take action regarding the splinter of injustice in another believer's eye, we should take note of the log in our own. In the midst of many competing stories, we all struggle to maintain thoroughgoing loyalty to King Jesus. None of us has comprehensive, definitive solutions for the challenges of immigration, gun control, prison reform, and so on. We should never grow weary of listening to and learning from one another, believing that the Lord often speaks to his people through his people. In fact, we must ask each other for help—especially those brothers and sisters whose perspectives differ from our own. God's Story never envisions discipleship as a solitary, autonomous practice; through humility and mutual submission, we follow Jesus together. Let's give grace to one another as we're pulled by competing forces and we all seek alignment within the tapestry of God's Story.
5. *Be on the lookout for slanted versions of The Story.* There are so many competing stories, and many of them mimic The Story. As we learn to distinguish imitations from the real thing, we help one another find alignment with the true story of King Jesus.

Discussion

1. From Harry Potter to football rivalries to political campaigns, stories create tribal loyalties, uniting people around them. Think about the stories underlying your own allegiances. Besides The Story, what stories have been important for you and your family?
2. Reread Ephesians 4:1-16. What are some practical implications for practicing essential unity and subsidiary diversity within our own church? What can you do to promote and protect the unity of the group in the weeks ahead?
3. What is one slanted story that you grew up hearing? (Or what is one slanted story that you have told?) How did you come to recognize that it was out of step with The Story?
4. Take a look at the headlines of today's Washington Post. What are the stories underneath the stories, the happy endings promised (or achieved or lost)? How well do they sync with The Story?