

The 12 questions Thaddeus raises are the right questions we should all be asking in today's troubled world. Read with an open mind. Risk a change of heart. Don't get swept along into false answers that lead to only more injustice.

JOHN PERKINS, president, The John and Vera Mae Perkins Foundation; author of *One Blood*

As an African American pastor of a predominately African American church, I'm often asked what book I would recommend on the controversial topic of social justice. Thaddeus Williams has written my top recommendation. Thoroughly biblical, well-reasoned, and deeply charitable, this balanced book is a beacon of gospel light to every believer desiring to confront injustice armed with the truth of the Word. There are few issues of our day more important for Christians to get right than this one, and we owe Dr. Williams a debt of gratitude for his courage and skill applied to the production of this excellent work.

ANTHONY D. KIDD, pastor of preaching,
Community of Faith Bible Church, South Gate, California

This is the most important book I have recommended in over twenty years. I have known Professor Williams for many years as a graduate student, friend, and faculty colleague. He is recognized as a person who walks what he talks. Thus, he brings biblical rigor, fidelity, cultural sensitivity, and concern to the topics in this book. It is now the go-to resource for clear, biblical thinking about social justice. I know of no other evangelical book with such rigor, insight, biblical fidelity, ethical maturity, and breadth of coverage as this one. This is the book for you!

J. P. MORELAND, distinguished professor of philosophy,
Talbot School of Theology; author of *Finding Quiet*

If you are a Christian concerned about oppression, injustice, racism, and other moral ills that plague our culture, there may not be a more important book you read this year. Secular ideologies offer solutions to age-old problems that may act like temporary fixes, but only the Christian worldview can provide a robust and deeply satisfying action plan. *Confronting Injustice without Compromising Truth* is the definitive guide to help Christians "do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God . . ." as Micah 6:8 puts it, while not sacrificing one iota of biblical truth.

ALISA CHILDERS, blogger and podcast host at
www.alisachilders.com, author of *Another Gospel?*

Confronting Injustice without Compromising Truth is the book I've been waiting for! This is the book that explains and analyzes the social justice movement—that treats it fairly and evaluates it critically. This is the book that prioritizes the gospel as the foundation for any true justice. This is the book that helps Christians understand why they must emphasize social justice, but why they must emphasize the right kind of social justice. This is the book I highly recommend.

TIM CHALLIES, blogger at www.challies.com,
author of *Do More Better*

Williams shows us how to think *from* the Christian faith, rather than allowing the categories and concerns of the day to rule the way Christians talk about race, politics, and inequality. This well-written, highly engaging book deserves careful consideration by every thoughtful Christian concerned about the issues of our time—not least because it allows Scripture to question some of our key assumptions about these issues, while also providing alternative ways to think about and engage them as kingdom citizens.

UCHE ANIZOR, associate professor of theology,
Biola University; author of *How to Read Theology*

Simply outstanding. Williams is fair-minded to Christians on both sides of the political spectrum while not shying away from what needs to be said. This urgently needed guide brings clarity to one of the greatest confusions Christians have in today's culture: discerning the difference between notions of justice rooted in a Christian worldview and those rooted in a godless secularism. Make no mistake—there's a critical difference, and it's one that's dangerously deceiving a great number in the church.

NATASHA CRAIN, blogger at www.christianmomthoughts.com;
author of *Talking with Your Kids about Jesus*

In our tribalized social-media age, the loudest voices are the ones that tend to get a hearing. But I'm thankful for the thoughtful voices that speak with wisdom to some of the most contentious issues we face today. Thaddeus Williams tackles them all—racism, sexuality, socialism, abortion, critical theory, identity politics—and argues that social justice, while not the gospel, isn't optional for Christians. Justified people seek to be a just people. But Williams also reminds us that not everything branded “social justice”—the increasingly superficial, knee-jerk activism of our day is truly biblical. Whatever your starting point in this conversation, here's a book that will help inform, equip, and serve the church.

IVAN MESA, editor, the Gospel Coalition

Are you concerned about social justice and the church? If so, Thaddeus Williams's contribution to the discussion is a must-read. As an academic committed to justice concerns, I'm thankful for Williams's approach. He's unequivocal yet charitable and proves to be percipient and discerning as he unpacks his subject with care achieving the often elusive combination of necessary depth and broad accessibility. Join him and his cadre of diverse contributors as they address arguably the most significant issue facing today's church.

PAT SAWYER, professor of education and cultural studies,
University of North Carolina at Greensboro

Thaddeus, without a doubt, distributed some much-needed truth to the issue of how the social justice argument is contrary to gospel truth. His section on "Sinners or Systems" was a breath of fresh air to a critical thinker like myself. I recommend this work to anyone who desires to stand on the side of the truth rather than speculations when it pertains to how we apply the Word of God in today's cultural climate.

JAMAL BANDY, host, the *Prescribed Truth* podcast

Wherever one finds oneself in the debate related to Christians and social justice, this important work by Thaddeus Williams and friends will offer wise guidance to these challenging issues. Williams is to be commended for his courage in offering this road map for his readers. Anyone who wishes to engage in the debate regarding social justice in the days ahead will find *Confronting Injustice without Compromising Truth* an essential prerequisite to that discussion.

DAVID S. DOCKERY, president, International Alliance
for Christian Education; theologian-in-residence,
Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

As a parent, teacher, and Christ-follower, my heart has been so troubled by the way many Christians have been drawn into false notions of social justice. Williams's book provides the kind of courageous, clear, truth-telling that can help bring sanity and unifying, gospel-centered love and justice to hurting people, fragmented churches, and a hostile world. This book provides direction for those who would seek to do justice in a way that honors God and truly loves others without resorting to us-versus-them dichotomies that tear people apart.

LAURA ROSENKRANZ, mother, teacher

“Social Justice”—the very term too often quickly divides the room, resulting in rancor, uncivility, and broken relationships. This work will change that. Williams’s bold contribution displays devotion to loving both God and neighbor with fidelity. Traveling beyond bogus binaries, pietistic proof-texting, and poisonous partisanship, Williams instead probes today’s complex issues with riveting penetration, yet gracious patience so this crucial conversation can be continued, not censored.

JEFFERY J. VENTRELLA, senior counsel, senior vice president of academic affairs and training, Alliance Defending Freedom

Thaddeus Williams tackles the emotional topic of social justice in a way that is simultaneously personable, compassionate, and biblically faithful. Thaddeus doesn’t try to “Christianize” secular social justice ideology with a few Bible verses taken out of context. Rather, he works toward a faithful presentation of the biblical data. As a theologian working on justice questions, I am grateful for this contribution to this field.

KRISTA BONTRAGER, theologian at Theology Mom, cohost of *All the Things* podcast

In the task of fulfilling a biblical vision for humanity, we must heed the cry of our generation. This book calls us to conform our minds to the truth that informs justice. With its source in God, justice must flow through the human heart in order for it to be actualized in our world. *Confronting Injustice without Compromising Truth* attempts to clear the way to let justice roll down as waters.

JACOB DANIEL, founder, The Heritage Counsel

Williams offers a needed correction to some of the excesses in today’s modern social justice movement. He does so without denying the existence of many of the problems such movements hope to address. The addition of *Confronting Injustice without Compromising Truth* to our personal libraries will help us to move closer to a holistic approach to issues tied to social justice.

GEORGE YANCEY, professor of sociology, Baylor University; author of *Beyond Racial Gridlock*

Thaddeus Williams raises a number of good questions about justice—how the Bible defines it, what actions promote it, and what philosophies and ideologies might undermine it. There’s plenty here to challenge your presuppositions and assumptions—all with the goal of being more faithful to Scripture and clear-eyed regarding today’s possibilities and pitfalls for doing justice in society.

TREVIN WAX, senior vice president for theology and communications, LifeWay Christian Resources; author of *Rethink Your Self*

CONFRONTING
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**12 QUESTIONS CHRISTIANS SHOULD
ASK ABOUT SOCIAL JUSTICE**

THADDEUS J. WILLIAMS

**WITH THE VOICES OF SURESH BUDHAPRITHI, EDDIE BYUN,
FREDDY CARDOZA, BECKET COOK, BELLA DANUSIAR,
MONIQUE DUSON, MICHELLE LEE-BARNEWALL, OJO OKOYE,
EDWIN RAMIREZ, SAMUEL SEY, NEIL SHENVI, AND WALT SOBCHAK**

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ACADEMIC**

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Confronting Injustice without Compromising Truth

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*To Gracie, Dutch, Jalula, and Henny
May you each grow “to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8)*

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Foreword

I was born on a Mississippi cotton plantation in 1930. My mother died of nutrition deficiency when I was just seven months old. My big brother, a World War II veteran, was gunned down by a town marshal when I was seventeen years old. As a civil rights activist, I was jailed and beaten nearly to death by police. They tortured me without mercy, stuck a fork up my nose and down my throat, then made me mop up my own blood. I have known injustice.

It would have been the easiest thing in the world for me to answer hate with hate. But God had another plan for my life, a redemptive plan. Jesus saved me. He saved me from my sin. He saved me from what could have easily become a life of hatred and resentment. He saved me by his amazing grace. And it's by that same grace that I have spent the last sixty years with my wife, Vera Mae, confronting injustice. We have literally poured blood, sweat, and tears into the causes of civil rights, multiethnic reconciliation, community development, building good relationships between urban communities and the police, education, teaching the gospel, and wholistic ministry. I have labored not by my strength but "by his strength that works powerfully in me," as Paul said. And God has been faithful.

Through my sixty years of working for justice, I offer four admonishments to the next generation of justice seekers.

First, *start with God!* God is bigger than we can imagine. We have to align ourselves with his purpose, his will, his mission to let justice roll down, and bring forgiveness and love to everyone on earth. The problem of injustice is a God-sized problem. If we don't start with him first, whatever we're seeking, it ain't justice.

Second, *be one in Christ!* Christian brothers and sisters—black, white, brown, rich, and poor—we are family. We are one blood. We are adopted by the same Father, saved by the same Son, filled with the same Spirit. In John 17 Jesus prays for everyone who would believe in him, that people from every tongue, tribe, and nation would be one. That oneness is how the world will know who Jesus is. If we give a foothold to any kind of tribalism that could tear down that unity, then we aren't bringing God's justice.

Third, *preach the gospel!* The gospel of Jesus's incarnation, his perfect life, his death as our substitute, and his triumph over sin and death is good news for everyone. It is multicultural good news. In the blood of Jesus, we are able to truly see ourselves as one race, one blood. We've got to stop playing the race game. Christ alone can break down the barriers of prejudice and hate we all struggle with. There is no power greater than God's love expressed in Jesus. That's where we all find real human dignity. If we replace the gospel with this or that man-made political agenda, then we ain't doing biblical justice.

Fourth and finally, *teach truth!* Without truth, there can be no justice. And what is the ultimate standard of truth? It is not our feelings. It is not popular opinion. It is not what presidents or politicians say. God's Word is the standard of truth. If we're trying harder to align with the rising opinions of our day than with the Bible, then we ain't doing real justice.

Those four marks of my sixty years in ministry are exactly what this book is about and why I wholeheartedly stand behind it. Dr. Thaddeus Williams and his twelve coauthors are important voices for helping us pursue the kind of justice that starts with God, champions our oneness in Christ, declares the gospel, and refuses to compromise truth.

We are in the midst of a great upheaval. There is much confusion, much anger, and much injustice. Sadly, many Christian brothers and sisters are trying to fight this fight with man-made solutions. These solutions promise justice but deliver division and idolatry. They become false gospels. Thankfully, in these trying times, new conversations are happening, and the right questions are beginning to be asked. I believe the twelve questions Thaddeus raises in the book are the right questions we should all be asking in today's troubled world.

So I encourage you, read with an open mind. Risk a change of heart. Dare to reach across the divides of our day. Venture beyond anger and hurt into grace and forgiveness. Don't get swept along into false answers that lead only to more injustice. Love one another. Confront injustice without compromising truth—healing, unifying, biblical truth! May this book be a guide to do exactly that, for God's glory and the good of every tongue, tribe, and nation.

John M. Perkins
President Emeritus
John and Vera Mae Perkins Foundation
Jackson, Mississippi
*Author of One Blood, Let Justice Roll
Down, and With Justice for All*

Why Write about the Most Explosive, Polarizing, and Mentally Exhausting Issues of Our Day?

My wife and I muse together over the fact that we are the last generation on earth to know life without the internet. I didn't hear the first dying robot-cat squeals of a dial-up modem until I was fourteen. That is not the only major culture shift I am old enough to have lived through. I came of age in the 1990s. It was the heyday of not only Britney Spears, grunge rock, and *Seinfeld* but also moral relativism in America. It was the "not that innocent" age of "come as you are" and "not that there's anything wrong with that." The only real sin was calling anything "sin." "Don't judge!" was the creed of the era (other than the actual band Creed, which, of course, it is always okay to judge).

Since then we have watched a culture that prided itself in its nonjudgmentalism turn into one of the most judgmental societies in history. Just this morning my news feed blew up with bristling judgments against every Christian who has yet to publicly voice their outrage about a headline that dropped less than twenty-four hours ago. If you happened to be off the grid hiking or at grandma's house, then too bad. "Your silence is deafening." You've been outed as the misanthrope you are before a digital jury of millions. "Make sweeping moral indictments of people you barely know" has replaced "Don't judge" as the anthem of our era. Some have branded our age the age of feeling or the age of authenticity. Another contender could be the age of the gavel.

Of course, there have always been judgmental mobs through history. But it took a lot of work. How do we get a critical mass of people assembled in the same physical space? How do we get someone with enough rabble-rousing charisma to rile everyone up? Who'll bring the pitchforks? Who's painting

the banners? Who's supplying the torches? Nowadays, anyone can stir up a judgmental mob with a few thumb taps on a glowing box while sipping a flat white in an air-conditioned coffee shop.

Let's be honest. Our ubiquitous judgmentalism is not sustainable. It's exhausting. With the trifecta of cell phones, the internet, and social media, horrible incidents scroll into our consciousness from all over the world every day. It's enough to make us envy the Amish. Except it isn't Jedediah's busted wagon or Zeke's bum horse that troubles our minds. We are bombarded with the worst of humanity around the globe faster than any generation in history. As technology has made the world smaller—small enough to fit into a rectangle in our pockets—it has made our awareness of how fallen our world is exponentially bigger. There is plenty to be morally outraged about, plenty of people voicing their outrage, and plenty of those willing to voice their moral outrage at others, either for not having enough or for having the wrong kind of outrage. It's really quite outrageous.

Why, then, would I write a book about the powder-keg issues that blow up our devices daily? Why write about “social justice,” given all the land mines buried in that word combination? I was recently asked a version of that question on a podcast. My response, given my character flaw of excessive sarcasm, was, “Mostly for the fame and popularity.” I am well aware that questioning the sacred orthodoxies of the Left and the Right will not score me any popularity points. It will likely earn me the ire of online mobs. Why *did* I write this book?

To be blunt, I have all the answers. I have managed to solve all society's complex problems so decisively that social media can again become what it was meant to be—a place where we share cat videos, epic fails, and glamorous filtered selfies instead of yelling at each other about politics all day. (Apologies, there's that sarcasm again.) I don't pretend to have all the answers, and my many blind spots will be seen by readers and critics alike. So let's try this again.

Did I write this for the sheer joy of it? Nothing, after all, sparks more fuzzy feel-good tingles than researching injustice every day for years. Wrong again. This was easily the most soul-taxing work I have ever written. But it *had* to be written, despite several prayerful pleas for a heavenly green light to call it quits.

One last try. It was not to win the approval of online inquisitors (because I won't) or because I have it all figured out (because I don't) or because it was fun (because it wasn't). I wrote this book because I care about God, I care about his church, I care about the gospel, and I care about true justice (though I am zero for four in caring as much as I should). Not all, but much of what is branded “social justice” these days is a threat to all four of those things I hold dear.

Even though I question popular versions of social justice, I have zero interest

in justifying racism or any other sinful “ism.” I have zero interest in protecting my power and privilege. I have zero interest in the kind of individualistic, head-in-the-clouds Christianity that plugs its ears to the oppressed. I care about bringing Christians together in the pursuit of more authentic worship, a more unified church, a clearer gospel, and more justice in the world. If you also care about advancing the kind of social justice that glorifies God first, draws people into Christ-centered community, and champions the good news of saving grace while working against real oppression, then this book is for you. If you don’t care about those things, then you are to a better world what Creed was to rock and roll.

Thaddeus Williams
Biola University
La Mirada, California

What Is "Social Justice"?

Every age of church history has its controversies. If we hopped into a DeLorean and set our digital clock to the '50s of the first century, one big question was, "What do we do with the Judaizers telling everyone that circumcision is essential to a right relationship with God?" If we punched in to the early fourth century, a big question was, "How should we think about the deity of Jesus?" If we hit eighty-eight miles per hour and flashed to the early 1500s, we would grapple with whether salvation comes by God's grace alone or whether we could gaze at sacred relics and purchase indulgences to expedite our entry through the pearly gates.

I am convinced that social justice is one of the most epic and age-defining controversies facing the twenty-first-century church. In the twentieth century you would encounter the term *social justice* while auditing a sociology course or perhaps joining the chapter of a local activists' group. Now it is in our coffee shops, our ads for soda, shoes, and shaving cream, our fast food establishments, our Super Bowls, our internet browsers, our blockbuster movies, our kindergarten curricula, our Twitter feeds, our national media, and our pulpits. It's everywhere.

Whether we see this as progress or as something pernicious hangs on questions that seem to have nothing to do with social justice controversies. Who is God? What does it mean to be human? Why does the church exist? When did the world go wrong and how can it be put right? To be a Christian who thinks seriously about social justice in the twenty-first century is to simultaneously face all the big questions that our brothers and sisters have faced for the last two thousand years of church history. Few see the deeper issues at stake.

Truly Execute Justice

Social justice is not optional for the Christian. (What justice isn't social, for that matter? God designed us as social creatures, made for community, not loners designed to live on deserted islands or staring solo at glowing screens all day. All injustice affects others, so talking about justice that isn't social is like

talking about water that isn't wet or a square with no right angles.) The Bible is crystal clear:

God does not suggest, He commands that we do justice.

Do justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor him who has been robbed.¹

What does the LORD require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?²

Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of wickedness,
to undo the straps of yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and break every yoke?³

Doing justice brings a brightness and blessing into our lives.

Then shall your light break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up speedily. . . .
If you pour yourself out for the hungry
and satisfy the desire of the afflicted,
then shall your light rise in the darkness
and your gloom be as the noonday.⁴

Defending the cause of the poor and needy is what it means to know God.

He judged the cause of the poor and needy;
then it was well.
Is not this to know me?
declares the LORD.⁵

Apathy toward the oppressed can hinder our prayers and sever our connection with God.

When you spread out your hands,
I will hide my eyes from you;

even though you make many prayers,
 I will not listen;
 your hands are full of blood. . . .
 Cease to do evil,
 learn to do good;
 seek justice,
 correct oppression;
 bring justice to the fatherless,
 plead the widow's cause.⁶

"Seek justice"⁷ is a clarion call of Scripture, and those who plug their ears to that call are simply not living by the Book. But the Bible's call to seek justice is not a call to superficial, knee-jerk activism. We aren't commanded to merely execute justice but to "*truly* execute justice."⁸ That presupposes there are *untrue* ways to execute justice, ways of trying to make the world a better place that aren't in sync with reality and end up unleashing more havoc in the universe. The God who commands us to seek justice is the same God who commands us to "test everything" and "hold fast to what is good."⁹

Jesus launched his public ministry in a synagogue, declaring his mission to "proclaim good news to the poor . . . liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed."¹⁰ But Jesus did not seek justice at the level of headlines and hearsay. One of the marks of the Messiah is that "he shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide disputes by what his ears hear, but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth."¹¹ When he encountered a group in protest over what they saw as the gross injustice of Sabbath day violations, he called out their unwarranted moral outrage, their failure to get at the real issues: "Do not judge by appearances, but judge with right judgment."¹²

Paul prayed that the Philippians' love would "abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment."¹³ He told the Romans not to conform to the world but to renew their minds, that by testing they "may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect."¹⁴ He commands us to "take every thought captive to obey Christ."¹⁵ That includes the way we think about social justice. We can't separate the Bible's commands to do justice from its commands to be discerning. The oppressed deserve more than our good intentions. We must love them not merely with our hearts and hands but with

The oppressed deserve more than our good intentions. We must love them not merely with our hearts and hands, but with our heads too.



our heads too. This includes carefully distinguishing true social justice from its counterfeits.

Social Justice A and B

We won't get far unless we stop to ask, "What do we mean when we say 'social justice'?" What are we to make of this potentially explosive combination of thirteen letters? "I put on my prospector's helmet and mined the literature for an agreed-upon definition of social justice," says one popular journalist. "What I found," he laments, "was one deposit after another of fool's gold. From labor unions to countless universities to gay rights groups to even the American Nazi Party, everyone insisted they were champions of social justice."¹⁶

Perhaps we could use *social justice* to describe what our ancient brothers and sisters did to rescue and adopt the precious little image-bearers who had been discarded like trash at the dumps outside many Roman cities. The same two words could describe William Wilberforce's and the Clapham Sect's efforts to topple slavery in the UK, along with Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, and others in the US. *Social justice* could describe Sophie Scholl's and the White Rose Society's work or Dietrich Bonhoeffer's and the Confessing Church's efforts to subvert Hitler's Third Reich. It could also describe Abraham Kuyper's vision, not of an individualistic pietism but of a robust Christianity that seeks to express the lordship of Jesus over "every square inch" of life and society.

Nowadays, the same word combination could even describe Christian efforts to abolish human trafficking, work with the inner-city poor, invest in microloans to help the destitute in the developing world, build hospitals and orphanages, upend racism, and protect the unborn. Let us call this broad swath of biblically compatible justice-seeking "Social Justice A."

When many brothers and sisters hear the words *social* and *justice* put together, that's the kind of stuff they think about. They aren't wrong. But for many brothers and sisters, the identical configuration of thirteen letters is packed with altogether non-Christian and often explicitly anti-Christian meanings. They aren't wrong either.

In the last few years, *social justice* has taken on an extremely charged political meaning. It became a waving banner over movements like Antifa, which sees physical violence against those who think differently as "both ethically justifiable and strategically effective" and celebrates its underreported "righteous beatings." Social justice is the banner waved by a disproportionate ratio of professors in universities around the nation where the "oppressor vs. oppressed" narrative of Antonio Gramsci and the Frankfurt School, the deconstructionism

of Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, and the gender and queer theory of Judith Butler have been injected into the very definition of the term. This ideological definition of social justice has been enshrined in many minds not as *a* way but as *the* way to think about justice.

Social justice is also the banner over movements with a stated mission to "disrupt the western-prescribed nuclear family structure,"¹⁷ movements on college campuses that have resorted to violence to silence opposing voices, and movements that seek to shut down the Little Sisters of the Poor and Christian universities who will not bow to their orthodoxy. In other words, if we paint Christians who sound the call for biblical discernment about social justice as a bunch of culturally tone-deaf curmudgeons, then it is we who are tone-deaf to the current cultural moment. We are naive to the meanings that have been baked into many minds with the word combination of *social* and *justice*. Let us call this second kind of justice-seeking "Social Justice B," the kind of social justice that, for reasons we will explore, conflicts with a biblical view of reality.¹⁸

Hopefully, Christians across the political spectrum can unite around the fact that not everything *branded* social justice *is* social justice. When Antifa and the American Nazi Party both consider themselves bastions of social justice, most can agree that there are forms of "social justice" that go too far. Let's call the kind of justice we should seek "Social Justice A" and the kinds we should not "Social Justice B." Where, then, are the boundaries? Where can we march forward together with interlocked arms and biblically faithful hearts? And where might a vision of justice cross the line and lure us away from "the faith once and for all entrusted to God's holy people"?¹⁹ Those are critical questions we must ask if the church is to pierce the political atmosphere of our age without bursting into fragments and flames.

Hopefully, Christians across the political spectrum can unite around the fact not everything *branded* social justice *is* social justice.



Madness Machines

It is especially easy in our day, even in the church, to think *we* are for justice while *they* are against justice. This certainly helps us feel better about ourselves. But it's not that simple. The point is brilliantly made in the HBO comedy series *Flight of the Conchords*. Murray Hewitt, band manager for a struggling folk parody duo from New Zealand, tries to convince the band to avoid getting political. He cautions them against writing any more songs on the divisive

issue of canine epilepsy. Murray argues, “If you were to record a song that was anti-AIDS, for example, then you’d end up alienating all those people that are pro-AIDS.”²⁰ A ten-second straw poll around the New Zealand consulate reveals the obvious. No one, it turns out, is pro-AIDS.

We don’t need a Gallup poll to tell us that basically no one identifies as pro-injustice. Yet ask half of America to describe the other half, and the majority would see the other half as pro-injustice. So what gives?

It all comes down to the issues behind the issues. The transgender debate isn’t about pronouns. The same-sex marriage debate isn’t about cakes. The abortion debate isn’t about clumps of cells and coat hangers. The poverty debate isn’t about greedy capitalists versus the commies. People on both sides of those controversies believe they are fighting for justice. Peel away the layers of each controversy and, at the onion’s core, you’ll find different answers to some of life’s deepest questions.

Picture a big chrome box covered with buttons and blinking lights. In one end goes the question. What is economic justice? What is racial justice? What is social justice? And so on. Like a vending machine feeds on your dollar bill, this machine eats up your question. After some whizzing and buzzing, bits of paper spit out the other side. With red ink on tiny white fortune cookie rectangles come the answers: “Socialism is justice; get mad about capitalism” or perhaps “Socialism is injustice; get mad about socialism,” and so on.

Each of us has a machine like that deep in our consciousness, an apparatus of fundamental convictions that signals what constitutes justice versus what we should get mad about. Philosophers call it our worldview. A worldview is not what we might *say* we believe in a street survey or online quiz. It’s what we truly believe and act from in our core about who we are, where we came from, and where humanity is headed.

What philosophers call a “worldview,” I will call a “madness machine.” In goes the questions: “That baker declined to bake a cake for a gay couple’s wedding. Should I be mad?” “That person makes a lot more money than that other person. Should I be mad?” “Those scientists want to genetically engineer a superior breed of humanity. Should I be mad?” Answers to such questions never poof into existence in a vacuum. They emerge from an intricate, often subconscious, network of beliefs and convictions, from a madness machine that yields conclusions about what in our news feeds should incur our wrath.

The question, again, is not who is pro-injustice. That’s a self-serving and simplistic way to see it. No one stands on the corner waving a “Boo Justice!” protest sign. Our answers are a product of our underlying worldviews. Different madness machines churn out different political conclusions. Of course, that does

not make justice relative. Certain worldviews are more calibrated toward human flourishing than others. Before the civil rights movement brought about greater racial justice in the 1960s, it had already gotten certain aspects of human nature profoundly right. Martin Luther King Jr.’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” for example, understood “the dignity and worth of human personality,” that human rights are “God-given,” that “all men are created equal,” that man is nevertheless haunted by “tragic sinfulness,” but that we should be like Jesus Christ, “an extremist for love, truth, and goodness.”²¹ Some worldviews are more broken. They spit out answers that claim to be about justice, but unwittingly hurt people by misunderstanding what makes people *people*. Before communist experiments in economic justice went wrong in the twentieth century, communism had already gone wrong on human nature, denying the reality of sin in every human heart, reducing people to *homo economicus*, and blaming all evil on systems.²²

If we, as a culture and as a church, can’t have the hard conversations about enduring questions—What are humans for? What is our place in the universe? Are we fallen? How do we flourish?—then it is unlikely we will rise above the self-righteousness of our political tribes. There is simply no worldview-neutral way to think about or act out justice.

12 Questions: An Overview

The problem is not with the quest for social justice. The problem is what happens when that quest is undertaken from a framework that is not compatible with the Bible. Today many Christians accept conclusions that are generated from madness machines that are wired with very different presuppositions about reality than those we find in Scripture. We shirk God’s commands and hurt his image-bearers when we unwittingly allow unbiblical worldview assumptions to shape our approach to justice. Now is the time to show the watching world just how true, good, and beautiful justice becomes when we are driven by the Creator and his Word rather than cultural fads.

This book is about helping Christians better discern between Social Justice A and Social Justice B. Part 1, “Jehovah or Jezebel?,” asks three questions about worship that will help us better seek justice without losing sight of the godhood of God. Part 2, “Unity or Uproar?” asks three questions about community that will help us better seek justice without becoming bitter and divisive. Part 3, “Sinners or Systems?” asks three questions about salvation that will help us better seek justice without losing the gospel. In Part 4, “Truth or Tribes Thinking?” asks three questions about knowledge to help us seek justice without losing our minds and sacrificing truth on the altar of ideology.

Each of the twelve questions posed through these chapters concludes with a personal story from one of my coauthors, dear brothers and sisters who have found liberation from bad ideas through Jesus—liberation from white supremacy, identity politics, and other ideologies of rage and division. Each chapter offers questions for personal reflection or small group discussion. These twelve chapters are followed by several appendixes that shed light on specific controversies for interested readers, including abortion, racism, socialism, sexuality, and other social justice questions.

The “Newman Effect”

Conversations about social justice in our polarized age tend to generate more heat than light because of a phenomenon we may call the “Newman effect.” In 2018 Canadian psychology professor Jordan Peterson joined Channel Four host Cathy Newman to discuss gender inequality in what became one of the most viral interviews of the twenty-first century. The lively exchange sparked the “So you’re saying” meme, based on Newman’s repeated use of that phrase to interpret Peterson’s statements in the most unflattering and inflammatory light possible.

So you’re saying that anyone who believes in equality . . . should basically give up, because it ain’t gonna happen . . .

You’re saying that’s fine. The patriarchal system is just fine . . .

You’re saying that women aren’t intelligent enough to run these top companies . . .

You’re saying that trans activists could lead to the deaths of millions of people . . .

You’re saying that we should organize our societies along the lines of the lobsters . . .²³

Professor Peterson wasn’t saying any of that. But because his perspective did not fit neatly into the black-and-white boxes of our day, anything that seemed out of sync with Newman’s perspective was taken in the most extreme, cartoonish, and damning way possible.

The truth is, we are all Cathy Newmans now, and that has become a serious existential threat to the unity of the church. “Racism is still a problem.”

“So you’re saying we should abandon the gospel and embrace neo-Marxism!” “Black lives matter.” “So you’re saying all lives don’t matter?” “The fact that 70 percent of black children are born without married parents in the home should matter to us!” “So you’re saying you’re a racist, blaming the victim, and saying the black community’s problems are completely their own fault!” “Marriage is a complementary union between a male and a female.” “So you’re saying you hate gay people.” “During the COVID-19 pandemic, we should shelter in place to protect the most vulnerable.” “So you’re saying you are anti-freedom and want us all to bow to tyranny!” “We should reopen the economy to help those whose livelihoods and mental health are being devastated by quarantine.” “So you’re saying you want the virus to spread and more people to die!” The list could go on and on.

This is what conversations about important questions have reduced to in our day and age. The only way someone could possibly disagree with me is if they are a bad person, a sworn enemy of justice. And so we tar-and-feather any dissonant idea with the worst ideologies we can imagine. The result is rampant self-righteousness, a loss of humble self-criticism, widespread confirmation bias, a loss of real listening required to reach nuanced truths, and pervasive partisanship, a loss of real community that requires us to give charity and the benefit of the doubt to others. The Newman effect has become a true meme, not just in the popular sense of a witty graphic shared on social media but also in the more technical sense of a kind of “thought contagion,” an idea or phenomenon that transmits person-to-person throughout culture.²⁴

Given the Newman effect, each of the four parts of this book will end with a brief section called “So You’re Saying,” in which I address some of the most predictable misreads of what my coauthors and I are actually saying.

Four Essential Disclaimers

I offer four more important disclaimers. First, some may think what I have branded Social Justice A is just a clever way of pushing right-wing politics. Let me be clear. *Social Justice A—the kind of justice that flows from Scripture—is not synonymous with the Republican Party or its policies.* This book is about social justice, which is a banner waved mostly by the political left. That fact should not be taken as if I am baptizing the right. There are plenty of problems and antigospel tendencies on the right too, some of which will come to light in this book. I preach and teach against those often. Yet no book can be about everything. Since this book is about social justice—a label adopted mostly by those on the left—that will be our focus.

My friend and colleague Rick Langer talks often about what he brands “hermit crab theology.” A hermit crab does not have its own shell. It finds some other shell to call home and crams itself inside. Hermit crab theology takes Jesus and jams him inside the preexisting shell of some extrabiblical ideology. This book offers reasons we should never cram Jesus into leftist ideology, and I would say the same thing about the right. Why? Because Jesus is too big to fit into the gnarled, cracked shells of any man-made political party.

Second, some may think I am building a straw man of Social Justice B, cherry-picking worrisome quotes from radicals to weave an ominous picture of a helpful movement in the church. Surely Christians aren’t really buying into the bad ideas as you present them! I assure you, the doctrines of Social Justice B I present are doctrines I have read or heard face-to-face from people who identify as Christians, including many leaders and influencers, with increasing frequency. *If you find any of the Social Justice B doctrines objectionable or not representative of how you approach social justice, then I say, “Fantastic!” We have found yet one more area where we can march together toward justice.* Again, one of my driving motives behind this book is to spur more unity in the church over the splintering questions of social justice. That includes showing where ideas marketed as “social justice” cross the line from Christian truth into a danger zone of bad ideas that hurt people.

Third, *this book should not be used as a billy club to bash brothers or sisters who disagree with us.* We must actively resist a bad habit that is so easily formed in cyberspace today. A Christian brother or sister posts about the reality of racism. The lazy, predictable, and utterly unfruitful response would be to instantly assume the worst—they must be a social justice warrior snowflake, brainwashed by far left identity politics! A brother or sister comments that this or that event may not, in fact, be as racist, sexist, or homophobic as the media would have us believe. Again, it is easy to write them off as far right bigots, stone-hearted to the plight of the oppressed. This easy and wide road of writing off those who challenge our perspectives leads us post-by-post into an echo chamber in which we can no longer smell our own smugness and self-righteousness because they become the daily air we breathe.

This leads to a fourth and final disclaimer from the pen of Francis Schaeffer: “I need to remind myself constantly that this is not a game I am playing. If I begin to enjoy it as a kind of intellectual exercise, then I am cruel and can expect no real spiritual results. As I push the man off his false balance, he must be able to feel that I care for him. Otherwise I will end up only destroying him and the cruelty and ugliness of it all will destroy me as well.”²⁵

Schaeffer, who spent his career engaging culture, was known to weep

often for a generation held captive by bad ideas. In doing so, Schaeffer followed in Paul’s footsteps, the apostle who said “with tears” that many “walk as enemies of the cross of Christ.”²⁶ Schaeffer and Paul imitated Jesus, who saw people “harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” and wept over Jerusalem.²⁷

We are talking about ideas that have real consequences for real people. Let me be clear: this book takes aim at *ideas*, not *people*. It takes aim only at certain ideas because they hurt people we are called to love. Please don’t take anything said here as an attack on *you as a person*. Please don’t use anything said here to attack *other people*. If we play by the rules of our current cultural moment, then our study will be little more than a self-righteous exercise in dehumanizing those we disagree with—expanding the chasm between a tribalized “us” and a demonized “them.” It is easy to be tickled by this or that problem in someone else’s ideology. It requires supernatural help to be genuinely concerned that fellow image-bearers, made to know and enjoy God, have been taken in by bad ideas.

God, help us do something radically countercultural—help us love, with tears if necessary, those we disagree with. Amen.

PART 1

JEHOVAH OR JEZEBEL?



Three Questions about Social Justice and Worship

You shall have no other gods before me.

—Exodus 20:3

Today almost everything is considered a matter of injustice, everything, of course, except the *main* thing. There is talk of economic injustice, reproductive injustice, racial injustice, and even, according to yesterday's headlines, facial injustice (based on a recent university policy that threatens expulsion for “mean” facial expressions).¹ What no one seems to be talking about—though it is at the bedrock of all other injustice—is *worship*. Theistic justice—bowing down to something that is worth bowing down to—is not *a* justice issue; it is *the* justice issue from which all other justice blooms.

Justice has been defined for millennia as giving others what is due them. Let's test that definition with a little exercise that will help us fine-tune our injustice detecting skills. In the following snapshots from Latin American history, see whether you can name, as precisely as possible, the injustices that occurred. In what ways were others not given what was due them? Fair warning: injustice is not pretty.

The year was 1519. While Martin Luther was busy launching the Protestant Reformation in Europe, a Spanish conquistador named Hernán Cortés landed in what is now Mexico City. Back then it was called Tenochtitlan, capital of the Aztec Empire, one of the five most populous cities on the planet. Towering over the city skyline stood Templo Mayor, a pyramid base with two peaks—a

red shrine for the sun god, Huitzilopochtli, and a blue shrine for the water god, Tlaloc.

At the sun god shrine, which today has a scaled-down model in Disney World's Epcot, tens of thousands had their hearts cut from their chests with flint knives. Hearts were set on fire and held up to the sky as an offering to Huitzilopochtli. Heads were removed for public display on a massive skull rack called the Huey Tzompantli, showcasing the skulls of as many as sixty thousand victims. Bodies were kicked down the 180-foot pyramid staircase to cannibals waiting below.

On the water god shrine of Templo Mayor, archeologists have found children's remains and evidence that the young Aztecs were brutalized before their ritualistic murders. Why? Because children's tears were believed to have sacred powers to please Tlaloc. I warned you that injustice is not pretty.

When Cortés and his conquistadors entered the city in November 1519, they brought with them new injustices. A Franciscan priest narrates: "Fear prevailed. . . . There was terror. . . . And the Spanish walked everywhere. . . . They took all, all that they saw which they saw to be good. . . . They took it all."² Within two bloody years Cortés and his troops had seized full control of the Aztec capital. The conquistadors quickly implemented a system called *encomienda*. *Encomienda* meant Spanish rulers had not just land but also, more importantly, the *people* on the land granted (or "encomended") to them as property over which they claimed total sovereignty.³

What happened next was exactly what tends to happen when fallen humans play God and pretend to be sovereign lords over one another: theft, oppression, rape, exploitation, fraud, murder. In short, social injustice is first and foremost a matter of misplaced worship.

These grim snapshots raise three questions about social justice and worship:

Does our vision of social justice take the godhood of God seriously?

Does it acknowledge the image of God in everyone, regardless of size, shade, sex, or status?

Does it make a false god out of the self, the state, or social acceptance?

Chapter 1

The God Question

Does our vision of social justice take
seriously the godhood of God?

We find an explanation of what occurred in Tenochtitlan in a two-thousand-year-old letter written from the opposite side of the globe. Both the Aztecs and the conquistadors did “what ought not to be done. They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness.”¹

Those words were written nearly 1,500 years before Cortés set foot in Tenochtitlan. They were written nearly seven thousand miles from the blood-drenched steps of Templo Mayor. They are words Paul the apostle wrote in the opening paragraphs of his famous letter to Rome around AD 57.

No Soft Glamour Filters

Paul of course wasn't trying to describe Tenochtitlan. He wasn't a time traveler. Yet Paul precisely described Tenochtitlan during the sixteenth century. He described American slavery in the nineteenth century. He described Enver Pasha's Turkey, Joseph Stalin's Soviet Union, Adolf Hitler's Germany, Mao Zedong's China, and Pol Pot's Cambodia in the twentieth century. He described the death cult of Jonestown, the genocidal horrors of Darfur and Rwanda, and countless other abominations. Paul described the human condition and our undeniable tendency to turn on each other with malice. Say what you will about Paul, but he wore no rose-colored glasses when he looked into the human heart.

Paul's refusal to drop a soft glamour filter over humanity might seem outdated and pessimistic to us. But any honest look at the twentieth century makes

it hard to write off Paul as a curmudgeon. As Jacques Maritain, originator of the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights, said after World War II, "We must have faith in man. But we cannot. . . . The present world of man has

We are, each of us, far more corrupt and corruptible, capable of unleashing far more injustice, than we admit to ourselves.



been for us a revelation of evil; it has shattered our confidence. . . . Our vision of man has been covered over by the unforgettable image of the bloody ghosts in extermination camps."²

It would be easy (and self-serving) to single out the Nazis, some who dropped Zyklon B canisters into the gas chambers, as some aberrant subhuman species spawned from hellfire. Read up on

Stanley Milgram's electrocution experiments, or simply show up at midnight for Black Friday deals at a local Walmart. You will learn the unflattering truth. SS officers are not the only corrupt ones. As Paul argues, "None is righteous, no, not one."³ We are, each of us, far more corrupt and corruptible, capable of unleashing far more injustice, than we admit to ourselves.

Giving the Creator His Due

Let's dig deeper into Paul's teaching. Paul refuses to interpret any inch of reality apart from God. To cut God off from our understanding is to block out the sun and bump around in the dark. We see everything in its truest light when we view it in light of God's existence. That includes the way we see humanity's grim track record of injustice as well as our own underrated capacity for evil. Paul highlights God's invisible attributes: "namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made."⁴

We pretend otherwise, but a transcendent power runs the universe, and deep down we know we are not him.⁵ God is God and we are not. We aren't the Creator; we are creatures. But we suppress that most fundamental truth about the basic structure of existence. This blurs our vision of everything else. Like the guilt-wracked protagonist of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart," we hide the old man under the planks. But his heart still beats. We plug our ears, we fabricate just-so stories in our own defense, we express #solidarity to feel good about ourselves, we entertain ourselves into a foggy-headed stupor—but his heart still beats.

Paul's unflattering description of us continues: "Although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened."⁶

Refusing to give the Creator the honor and gratitude he is due, we turn and bow to the cosmos. We endow created things with an ultimate value that they are not due. This is a double injustice. We fail to give both the Creator and the creation what they are properly due. In Paul's language, we "exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator."⁷

That is what happened at Tenochtitlan. The Aztec rulers brutalized and murdered the vulnerable. The conquistadors coveted their neighbors' gold. They lied to the natives. They raped their wives and daughters. They took them for slaves. They broke a long list of commandments. In breaking those commandments, they broke the first commandment. They had gods before God. They worshiped creation rather than the Creator. The Aztecs bowed to the gods of sun and rain. The conquistadors exalted gold and power. That turn from Creator to creation worship was the first injustice of the Aztecs and conquistadors, the broken command that formed the essential premise and toxic fountainhead of all their other injustices.

This tragedy plays out in gruesome detail throughout the Old Testament. Slavery, murder, rape, child abuse, and theft happen when people worship idols instead of God. The first commandment, to have no gods before God, is where any authentically Christian vision of justice begins. Devalue the original by putting something else in his place and it's easier to treat the images like garbage.

That is what is so profound about Paul's take on injustice in Romans 1. He does not merely note that humanity is "full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, [and] maliciousness,"⁸ then blame all that injustice on society and dream up a utopian political solution the way Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels did. Paul does not look at the bad fruit on the human tree and then suggest replanting it in the different soil of some new political ideology. Paul knows that the human tree is so hopelessly sick that whatever soil you plant it in, toxic fruit will form. No amount of political revolution, social engineering, or policy tweaking will stop envy, strife, deceit, and maliciousness from sprouting out of our sick hearts.

Why were all the utopias of the modern era doomed to fail? Because the evil did not originate in politics, society, or the economy. It is *expressed* there, but evil *originates* in human hearts that "exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things"⁹ and the sun and water and gold and sex and power.

Consider white supremacy. The belief that white-skinned humans are superior to other humans has led to many nonwhites not receiving what they are due. We must work to make white supremacy a dead relic of the past. But the injustice of white supremacy has a transcendent dimension, something almost

no one talks about that keeps us swatting at the bad fruits rather than chopping at the sick roots of racism. It makes race, not God, supreme. It worships and serves created things rather than the Creator. Racism, therefore, is not merely horizontally unjust, depriving other creatures what they are due; it is also vertically unjust, failing to give the Creator his due by making race an ultimate object of devotion. Why is racism so evil? If we leave God out of our answer to that question, we will fail to grasp the true diabolical depths of racism and find ourselves boxing ghosts of the real problem.

This, then, is how Paul adds deeper hues to our picture of injustice. *Look deep enough underneath any horizontal human-against-human injustice and you will always find a vertical human-against-God injustice, a refusal to give the Creator the worship only the Creator is due.* All injustice is a violation of the first commandment.

Calling Our Bluffs

A skeptic may object, “If you’re saying that the injustices people commit against each other are really failures to give God his due, then why are so many culprits of injustice the very people who worship the God of the Bible?” Why indeed. The conquistadors were Roman Catholic, after all. If you could time-travel back five hundred years and ask them, they would likely tell you that they worship the Christian God. That’s the beauty of Paul’s view of injustice. It calls our bluffs. It reveals what we *actually* worship regardless of what we *say* we worship. Yes, the conquistadors *claimed* to worship the God of the Bible. But their unjust actions falsified their claims. Their “envy, strife, deceit, and maliciousness” exposed them for what they were—not Creator-worshippers but creation-worshippers groveling on their knees to the false gods of power and profit. If we treat others unjustly, then we too are on our knees to creation rather than the Creator.

There is a reason that the first of the Ten Commandments—to have no gods before God—is the *first* of the Ten Commandments. Acknowledging that God is God—not the universe, not physical sensations, not shiny objects, not government, not our own desires—is where real justice starts. If justice means giving others their due, then we must ask the question, “What is due to the ultimate Other?” That is the first question toward a deeply biblical justice. God, the divine Other, is due *everything*. We have him to thank for all that is true, good, and beautiful in the universe. We owe him our obedience, our next breath, our very selves. If we shy away from that truth then we should not be surprised to find that—just like Marxists, white supremacists, the Gestapo,

and the KKK—we think we’re doing justice when we’re really just unleashing more havoc on earth. If our vision of social justice does not take the godhood of God seriously, then it is not really social justice.

EDDIE'S STORY

I loved every part of pastoring in South Korea—the shepherding, the teaching, the discipleship, and the evangelism. But in the fall of 2010, while I was walking through the busy streets of Seoul, God opened my eyes to a group of people I had completely missed. In the alleyways in Gangnam, one of Seoul’s bustling consumer areas with a booming nightlife, I found thousands of young women and girls had been forced into sexual slavery. What was even more disturbing was that no one was doing anything to end this evil or care for these victims. As a pastor, I knew our church had to get involved. So we began a justice ministry and opened the first Christ-centered aftercare center for survivors of sex trafficking in Korea.

God further opened my eyes as I read in the gospel of Matthew how the hungry, the thirsty, the poor, and the prisoner matter profoundly to Jesus. Throughout Scripture I saw God’s heart beating for the orphan, the widow, the fatherless, and the foreigner. What did these people have in common? They were the most vulnerable groups in their society. Scripture is crystal clear—the deeply vulnerable are deeply valuable to God.

Taking our cues from God’s character and commands, our church moved into those areas of vulnerability, looking for ways to serve. We helped rescue a fifteen-year-old named Jinny, who had been violated by a close relative at the age of six. The abuse continued until she was ten. That’s when she decided that the streets might be safer than her home. Within hours of her running away, an online trafficker lured Jinny into his home. From that day, she was abused ten to fifteen times a night for the next five years. By God’s grace, she was able to run away and find our aftercare center. Jinny had felt worthless her whole life. But through the life, love, and words of her new caregivers, she experienced unconditional love for the first time.

“Why do you care about us?” That was the most common question we would get from those whom society treated as mere sex objects. It was also the easiest question to answer. “We love you because God loves you.

We love you because we love God. And God loves you infinitely more than we ever could!" We could credibly verbalize the gospel with them because they could see how the gospel had reshaped our lives.

As we, as a church, stepped out in obedience to the Bible's justice commands, God empowered us to change fifteen laws in Korea concerning human trafficking and adoption. He inspired us to begin Christ-centered ministries to care for the least of these. He allowed us to shine light into some of the darkest places on earth. We discovered justice as a way of loving God by imitating the passions of his heart. We found that a deep love for God has a way of changing our desires so that we want to love others. We wanted to love what he loves. God says point-blank, "I the LORD love justice" (Isa. 61:8). God's heart beats with a passion for the vulnerable in our communities. So should ours.

In some ways, justice seems trendy in our day. But for the believer, we must remember that justice is not a fad; it is the foundation of God's throne (Ps. 89:14). And the One who sits on that throne is the One we seek to honor, love, and follow all our days. Let's start by giving God his due so that we may "truly execute justice one with another" (Jer. 7:5).

—Eddie Byun

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Questions for Personal or Small Group Study

1. How much of your justice-seeking energy is focused on giving God his due as your Creator and Redeemer? What are three ways our justice efforts would look different from today's popular visions of social justice if we made revering God the number one priority?
2. What is something you could do every day this week to demonstrate true reverence for God? What long-term habits could you form to orient your life around glorifying God first?
3. Why do you think God *commands* rather than *suggests* that we do justice? What do such commands have to do with God's character, with our chief end to glorify him, and with the mission of the church?

Chapter 2

The *Imago* Question

Does our vision of social justice acknowledge
the image of God in everyone, regardless
of size, shade, sex, or status?

Celebrated philosopher Charles Taylor pulls another puzzle piece from the carpet to help us fill in a bigger picture of justice. A defining mark of our secular age is what Taylor calls “the immanent frame.”¹

Justice in a Box

“The immanent frame” is Taylor’s fifty-cent philosophy term to describe that we, Christians included, tend to operate in the universe as if it is a closed box. We assume that the best way to make sense of the universe—what’s inside the box—is by *other stuff inside the box*. Charles Darwin and Richard Dawkins would have us make sense of all of life in terms of biology. Stephen Hawking and Neil deGrasse Tyson would reduce reality to physics. Sigmund Freud and Steven Pinker would point to psychology, Karl Marx and Friedrich Hayek to economics, Herbert Marcuse and Hugh Hefner to sex, Steve Jobs and Elon Musk to technology, Disney and TMZ to entertainment. Invoke God as an explanation of reality—Someone good who is *unconfined* by the box because he *made* the box—and, to most people, you might as well play in the fiery apocalypse on a handcrafted Swanson flute, yelling “Hail Zorp!” at strangers in the park.²

What if the joke is on us? What if many of today’s attempts at justice have become so laughable precisely because we have laughed out of the room the Being who is most serious about true justice? Nothing inside the box grounds equality or dignity or value. If we’re all just bodies in a box, then mine is not

equal with Usain Bolt's, which can run the forty-yard dash in about four seconds, or Brad Pitt's, which can pull off skinny jeans without looking ridiculous. Only if there is Someone good, Someone beyond the box who made the box, Someone whose image all of us bear—regardless of our physical, economic, sexual, or political status—that things like equality, dignity, and value become more than bumper-sticker slogans. Limiting ourselves to “the immanent frame” is hardly a recipe for long-term justice or progress. That's why about 99.9 percent of MLK's “Letter from Birmingham Jail” appeals to equality, dignity, and values beyond the immanent frame.

By starting our exploration of justice with the question “What is due to God?” let me be clear: we are committing twenty-first-century heresy. We are starting from beyond the immanent frame. But any truly Christian approach to justice must be an outside-the-box perspective. We must be heretics in the culture's eyes, willing to risk all kinds of unsavory labels, if we are to “truly execute justice” as Scripture commands.

By starting with “What is due to God?” we have hit on the same insight that the great North African theologian Augustine discovered over a millennium ago. In a sermon on love, he attempted to sum up the entire Christian ethic with the famous line, “Love God and do what you want.”³ If I treasure God as God, that first affection should recalibrate all my other affections, my other wants. I won't *want* to lie to you, since you bear the noble image of the God I love most. I won't *want* to steal your stuff or your spouse, because you carry the unique image of the God I love most. I won't *want* to exploit you as a means to my own selfish ends, since you are made in the irreducibly valuable image of the God I love most. Love God, the ultimate Other, and you will give those who bear your Beloved's image the respect they are due.

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Had the Aztecs loved the actual God more than they loved the sun and water, they would not have wanted to treat people like chopped meat. Had the conquistadors loved the actual God more than they

loved gold and power, they would not have wanted to treat the Aztecs like rats to be exterminated, sex toys to be exploited, or property to be owned. The tens of thousands of victims at Templo Mayor and the hundreds of thousands of victims of *encomienda* did not receive what was due them because other people's wants were disordered. They were not loved like the image-bearers of God that they were, because the Aztecs and conquistadors did not love the God whose image they bore.

Opening the Box

In a tightly reasoned article entitled “Does Naturalism Warrant a Moral Belief in Universal Benevolence and Human Rights?” Notre Dame sociologist Christian Smith helps us deepen Augustine’s insight. Smith argues that naturalism—the belief that there are no supernatural realities, only nature and its processes—is often espoused by those who are zealously committed to universal human rights. But, Smith argues, we can’t have it both ways. Take, for example, the rally cry of “Equality!” If naturalism is true, then human beings *are* their bodies. There is nothing more to us. Atheists like Jean-Paul Sartre, Arthur Leff, and Alex Rosenberg have bolstered Smith’s point.⁴ If we’re nothing more than matter, then there seems to be no meaningful way to talk about justice.

If we are reducible to our bodies, then what is the foundation for human equality? Charles Darwin saw none and explicitly argued against human equality.⁵ Our bodies are not equal. Michael Jordan’s body could slam dunk a basketball from the free throw line. Mine cannot. Alex Honnold’s body can free-climb the three-thousand-foot face of El Capitan. Mine cannot. Some of us were born with a higher genetic propensity to develop certain ailments. Others were born winning a genetic lottery, with low chances of getting certain diseases. If atheist Jacques Monod was right that “man is a machine,” then some of us are Ford Pintos and some are Teslas. Some of our bodies are a boxy 1980s PC and others are the latest Mac. If we are to speak meaningfully about human equality, then there must be something more to us than our bodies—something beyond Taylor’s immanent frame—that anchors our shared value.

There is a tendency today to reduce people not to bodies but to ideologies. We don’t see a human being so much as we see social justice snowflakes to our left and neo-Nazi fascists to our right. Or we see and treat people on the basis of their skin color or gender or whom they want to sleep with. That is why giving God his due is so important to real justice. We were born into the box. We spend every day bumping around inside the box. If we imagine that the box is closed, then bumping around in the dark, we hear what people say, feel them bump into us and assess how much inconvenience or pain they cause us, grope around and feel the size of their wallets, and categorize everyone and hypothesize how to make life inside the box happier.

It is easy to see one another not theologically in light of God’s existence but in terms of the categories culture supplies. Take the experience of Antonia Diliello (“Grandma Tony” as my wife and I call her or “Great-Grandma Tony” for my children). In the early 1930s in Oxnard, California, Grandma Tony

attended Roosevelt School, which had segregated classrooms and playgrounds. Mexican students even had a ten-minute longer school day “to avoid interracial socializing.”⁶ One day, she recalls, she was caught speaking Spanish: “I had to get a rock, draw a circle in the dirt, and stand in the middle . . . until the bell rang, and I felt like a weird person because, you know, everybody would come by and look at me, like I was on display. . . . And I felt like the ugliest, the dirtiest little girl around, you know, really bad.”⁷

Dirt circles aren’t the only way we’ve categorized people; there is a lamentable history of yellow star patches and numbered tattoos on Jewish image-bearers, lashing scars and lynching nooses on black image-bearers, and, more recently, one-eyed happy faces in red spray paint (representing the Arabic letter “noon,” for Nasara or Nazarenes) to mark Christian homes for destruction by the Islamic State in Iraq. When we reduce people to inside-the-box categories, we become oblivious to the beyond-the-box fact that every human being is a divine image-bearer. Justice requires that they be treated as such, regardless of size, shade, sex, or status.

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That is far easier said than done. We need supernatural help. We need the Holy Spirit’s

power to gift us with new sight, clearer vision to see others not as the prejudices of our subculture would have us see them or how social media propaganda would have us see them but as the God of the universe sees them. Lord, give us eyes to see.

A Simple Thought Experiment

This brings us full circle to our definition of justice. What is due to a “human being”—which I take as shorthand for an unfathomably precious image-bearer of God? It seems like not being defrauded, raped, brutalized, exploited, or murdered is a reasonable place to start. That’s why truth-telling, sexual boundaries, and treating people the way you want to be treated are all justice issues. They are all essential to treating human beings like the unfathomably precious image-bearers of God we are.

As we seek a more just world, if we see those who disagree with us as Republicans or Democrats, progressives or conservatives, radical leftists or right-wing fundamentalists first and as image-bearers second, or not at all, then we aren’t on the road to justice. We’re on history’s wide and bloody road to dehumanization.

Take a moment to think of specific people whose ideology you disagree with most. Pick your top three. It might be a public figure, a politician, a family member, a coworker, or a neighbor. Picture someone specific who you see as the living, breathing antithesis of everything you believe to be true and just. Picture that person, with all his or her smugness, in your mind's eye. Now think this true thought toward that person. "Image-bearer." Say it again. "Image-bearer." Once more for good measure. "Image-bearer." Next time you see that person, before your blood pressure starts to rise, repeat, "Image-bearer. Image-bearer. Image-bearer." Then treat that person as an image-bearer because that is who they were long before you found yourselves on opposite sides of a culture war. Then, when it starts to set in how incredibly difficult it is to treat people as image-bearers for more than five minutes, pray for yourself what Paul once prayed for the Thessalonians: "May the Lord make [me] increase and abound in love for one another and for all."⁸

WALT'S STORY

"Has anyone seen Kyle? He's about this tall," an acquaintance asked with his arm outstretched in a Nazi salute. I did not know what his mother called him, only his screen name. For security purposes, that was the norm. It felt like a group of trolls, a hodgepodge of people who had taken the red pill and met up in the Matrix. We were united in our love for one thing: European man.

Ethnically, we were predominantly Americans, but our family backgrounds were Anglo, Irish, Scottish, Russian, Czech, Danish . . . so long as you were not Jewish, you were all right. Ideologically, we were Fascists, National Socialists, monarchists, and Republicans. Socially, we were poor kids who grew up as skinheads, wealthy Mormons, lonely divorced women, and dedicated husbands. Religiously, we were predominantly godless, though some who identified as Christians and even Buddhists joined our ranks. What brought us together was the ideology of white supremacy.

Reflecting back on this point in my life is quite surreal. Had you asked me ten years ago if I detested *any* group of people, I would have wholeheartedly exclaimed, "No!" Yet I ended up in a racist hate group. How on earth did I get there?

I, and many of the predominantly young men with me, felt forced into

a corner. From our public institutions and the culture writ large, we had all heard something to the effect of “Well, you all deserve what’s coming to you” or “Well, you can’t have an opinion about that” or “Well, you must be racist” or “Well, these other peoples might be worth protecting, but you are expendable.” Our sense of self-worth was shattered by a never-ending stream of cultural voices declaring that by virtue of our skin tone, we were all members of the privileged group and, therefore, the enemies of social progress.

The constant stigma about being white leads young men right into the arms of radicals. Invert everything I said, and you get a radical leftist. “You wanna play the identity politics game? Fine, let’s play. We’ll win!” seems to be the message coming from loud voices on both sides of the political spectrum.

How did I escape this hopeless game? I can’t think of a specific time or place in which I surrendered to God’s grace. It was incremental. But if I were to talk to a younger version of myself, what could I possibly say that would make him think, “I am going to be okay. My life is worth living. Stop fearing the Light.” I would say this: “Your value is not rooted in creation but in the Creator. Your value is not rooted in the coincidental happenstance surrounding your birth but in infinite love from he who is Love.”

For anyone swept into identity politics, right or left, I realize simply saying “Jesus loves you” may not help you stop feeling bad about the world. Many Christians you know may seem completely against you. I get it. It hurts. But don’t fall into the trap of defining your life mission by how other people may see you. Define your life on the basis of God, who knew you in the womb and loved you from Eternity’s Gate. He has not forgotten you, nor could he. He knows and loves you enough to literally *die* for you. How can we see God crucified for every tongue, tribe, and nation and still think ourselves worthy because of our own melanin or merit?

Dear friends who may feel estranged and angry, come and achieve your long-sought revolution! Revolt against your own sin nature. Revolt against hate. Let God graciously turn your heart of stone into a heart of flesh. Look to Jesus and be saved!

–Walt Sobchak

Walt graduated from Biola University and is currently studying for lifelong ministry.

Questions for Personal or Small Group Study

1. Why is it sometimes so difficult to see people as divine image-bearers? Why does this make Paul's prayer for Christians to "increase and abound in love" so important for us to pray ourselves?
2. Are there any particular individuals you have a challenging time seeing and treating as image-bearers? For you personally, what might it look like to start treating them as divine image-bearers?
3. Are there any particular groups defined by inside-the-box categories—race, political persuasion, mental or physical disability, economic status, religion, etc.—whom you tend to look down on? What can you do this week to show love for anyone in those groups?