

Justice and the Way of Jesus

*Christian Ethics and
the Incarnational Discipleship of Glen Stassen*

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INTRODUCTION

Incarnational Discipleship and a Thicker Jesus

David P. Gushee and Reggie L. Williams

Glen Harold Stassen (1936–2014) was at first simply the most compelling professor we had ever met. David met Glen at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in 1984. Reggie met Glen a generation later, in 2005, at Fuller Theological Seminary. For both of us, Glen introduced the academic discipline, Christian ethics, that so utterly consumed him and which we both came to adopt as our own vocation. There are few people in anyone’s life of whom it can be said, “My life is fundamentally altered because I met you.” For both of us, Glen Stassen was such a person. Many of the authors in this collection can say the same thing.

For David, Glen moved from compelling professor to primary mentor, professional advocate, and very dear friend. After earning a doctorate in Christian ethics at Union Seminary (New York), which Glen recommended and to which Glen helped open the doors, David became a colleague of Glen’s at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary (1993–96) and eventually co-author of the widely used textbook *Kingdom Ethics*.¹ Today, David is Glen’s literary executor and the primary custodian of his professional memory.

1. Glen H. Stassen and David P. Gushee, *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2003). The second edition was published by Eerdmans in 2016 after Glen’s death.

For Reggie, Glen's impact also included being mentor and advocate. Reggie studied with Glen at the doctoral level at Fuller Seminary, and Reggie's dissertation became the widely cited book, *Bonhoeffer's Black Jesus*.² In the end, along with his other roles, Glen became something of a father figure to Reggie.

Our ties to the late Christian ethicist ran very deep, and we feel them very deeply to this day.

The origin of this collection goes beyond personal loyalty. Glen's last completed book before his death was called *A Thicker Jesus: Incarnational Discipleship in a Secular Age*.³ It was published in 2012, and it represented a major effort on Glen's part to offer a methodological statement and overall approach to the discipline of Christian ethics. Glen believed that he had found an approach better than the major existing alternatives, that it could be named "incarnational discipleship," and that it needed to be considered in any serious conversation about Christian ethics methodology.

It is easy for this drive on Glen's part to be misunderstood. It was not fundamentally motivated by personal or academic ambition, but by a wholehearted belief that so much was (and always is) at stake in Christian ethics. In particular, Glen believed that his approach could strengthen faithfulness to Jesus Christ in the contemporary church and could equip the church with a stronger public witness in American society—and both were desperately needed, because American Christianity, according to Glen, was deeply compromised both in its fidelity to Jesus and in its Christian witness.

After publishing *A Thicker Jesus*, Glen wanted to attract other scholars to the serious study of his proposal and to join him in refining and advancing it. He had employed a similar approach over the previous two decades in gaining wide attention to and adoption of his breakthrough work on the theory and practices of just peacemaking.⁴ He pulled together consultations of scholars, first Christian and

2. Reggie L. Williams, *Bonhoeffer's Black Jesus: Harlem Renaissance Theology and an Ethic of Resistance* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014).

3. *A Thicker Jesus: Incarnational Discipleship in a Secular Age* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012).

4. Glen Stassen's published books on peacemaking begin with *Journey into Peacemaking* (Memphis, TN: Brotherhood Commission of the Southern Baptist

then interfaith, to examine, refine, and advance this new approach to the ethics of peace and war. He wanted to do the same thing with his idea of a “thicker Jesus” and his methodology called “incarnational discipleship” (henceforth, in this book, we will consider these as terms of art and drop the quotation marks).

As Glen grew sicker from cancer in 2013 and early 2014, his primary professional project was still to bring together this meeting of scholars. Letters went out from the Just Peacemaking Institute at Fuller. For the historical record, here is an excerpt from one of Glen’s invitation letters:

Dear friends interested in joining together for incarnational discipleship:

I have gone slowly, discerning who might have a common interest in joining together to advocate doing theological ethics as incarnational discipleship. “Incarnational discipleship” is the name we have chosen for those heroes of the faith who stood the test of faithfulness in historical test times like the Third Reich, the Revolution of the Candles in East Germany, the US Civil Rights Movement, and the struggle for economic justice a century ago. They are Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Karl Barth, André Trocmé, [and] the leaders of the Revolution of the Candles, all of whom were disciples of Bonhoeffer and Barth, Martin Luther King, Jr., Clarence Jordan, and Dorothy Day and Muriel Lester.

Convention, 1983, 1987). Then came Glen H. Stassen, *Just Peacemaking: Transforming Initiatives for Justice and Peace* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992). He began building a coalition; thus Glen Stassen, ed., *Just Peacemaking: Ten Practices for Abolishing War* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1998/2008). Finally, after the expansion to an interfaith conversation came Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, ed., *Interfaith Just Peacemaking: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Perspectives on the New Paradigm of Peace and War* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), a book based on a consultation Glen helped arrange and in which Glen has a chapter. This journey demonstrates many things, including Glen’s deep commitment to just peacemaking and his intentional strategy of creating an ever-expanding community of co-practitioners. He intended the same trajectory for incarnational discipleship. Ironically, Glen’s relentless and largely successful advance of just peacemaking may have hindered his ability to gain attention to incarnational discipleship. Just peacemaking was Glen’s “brand”; could he develop another?

All these did ethics as incarnational discipleship, in three senses: (1) They all wrote with a thick, historically embodied, realistic understanding of Jesus Christ as revealing God's character and thus providing norms for guiding our lives. Bonhoeffer wrote *Discipleship*, Barth wrote the Barmen Declaration, Trocmé wrote *Jesus and the Nonviolent Revolution*, King wrote *Strength to Love*, Jordan wrote *The Sermon on the Mount*, Day and Lester's writings did exegesis of the way of Jesus as practical guidance for life. (2) They all wrote with a holistic understanding of the Lordship of Christ or sovereignty of God throughout all of life and all of creation. They opposed a two-kingdoms or body-soul or temporal-eternal dualism or sectarianism that blocks God's guidance in Christ from applying to public ethics. That required a tactical alliance with a tradition in the society, such as the human rights tradition. (3) They all wrote with a strong call for repentance [for] captivity to ideologies such as nationalism, racism, and greed. The Barmen Declaration roots this rightly in the Holy Spirit. We believe our focus should be on the ideology of laissez-faire capitalism, which since 1980 has changed income taxes, inheritance taxes, and reduced taxes on capital gains and dividends to 15%—the equivalent to low-level workers, not wealthy owners.

Our purpose is to join together as a group, first to refine our vision, and then to write with explicit reference to each other so that we strengthen attention to what each of us advocates, somewhat as Radical Orthodoxy does, but with a different vision. Thus we strengthen each other's voices.

We are following the method that developed the unanimous consensus for the new paradigm, Just Peacemaking, and the consensus support for Interfaith Just Peacemaking. It is not simply a discussion of papers, but a discussion of how to refine the vision and a plan for who will write papers for the book and for the second conference. In each of the previous efforts, we were surprised by how well we

reached consensus among scholars who come from different traditions.

In each of those two previous projects, we have found it useful to have a leadership team leading the discussion, one focusing on the vision, and one focusing on relationships. . . . I have enlisted stand-ins or substitutes for my own role. . . . The reason is that I have contracted prostate cancer, and my future strength is unknown. So you may be hearing from them about the conference.

The date was set for September 2014, at Princeton Seminary. Alas, Glen died on April 26, 2014, before the meeting could occur. The event, and the attention to his proposal, remained part of Glen Stassen's unfinished project in Christian ethics. This is said quite intentionally. Even though Glen died at the age of seventy-eight, his work seemed, to him at least, very much unfinished.

Death is almost always cruelly indifferent to the ambitions of scholars. Only very, very few thinkers in any field receive much attention after their pen has been stilled by mortality. But partly out of personal loyalty, and partly because we believed that Glen Stassen's late work was still unfinished and still worthy of engagement, five years later, the two of us called together a group of scholars in Atlanta to fulfill Glen's hope and discuss incarnational ethics and a thicker Jesus. This group included many of the same and some different participants from those whom Glen originally envisioned. We met in early April 2019.

We asked this group to interrogate the concept of incarnational discipleship as seriously as Glen wanted it done. We did not ask them to write encomiums of praise. We asked them to do what Glen had most wanted—to take his ideas seriously. For a true scholar, the greatest gift is to have one's ideas engaged, while the greatest offense is to have them ignored. Over a very full two days, a highly distinguished group of scholars, including several former presidents of the Society of Christian Ethics and American Academy of Religion, rendered that service of engagement to Glen's ideas of a thicker Jesus and incarnational discipleship, exchanging papers about it and

discussing those papers intensively with each other. Now the results of this classic academic process are before you in this volume.

This collection makes little sense without readers having encountered what Glen meant by incarnational discipleship. Thus, besides the excerpt from the letter, we include in the prologue a much longer extract from Glen's final address at the Society of Christian Ethics, offered when he was quite ill with cancer, in January 2014. This text, edited for length, offers at least a glimpse of what it was that Glen was proposing, an incarnational discipleship tradition that he was still trying to name and deepen. Those of us who were in the room that day can never forget both how passionate, and how ill, Glen was that day.

The chapters that follow engage, from each author's perspective, what Glen called incarnational discipleship. What results is a true intellectual feast and a step forward for the discipline of Christian ethics. The reader will not discover mere endorsements of the man or his ideas, but they will find a dozen scholars advancing the conversation about those ideas in ways that we think matter very much today.

Catholic scholar Lisa Sowle Cahill examines Glen's social ethics, exploring what "realistic hope" looks like in Christian social-political ethics and considering the basis of a justice-oriented Christian social ethics in the New Testament depiction of Jesus himself.

Jacob Cook, who worked closely with Glen as a doctoral student at Fuller and ran the Just Peacemaking Institute at the time of Glen's death, notices that, for Glen, incarnational discipleship was fundamentally about the nature of Christian identity, and its corruption. This is where his searching theological-ethical-psychological inquiry begins.

Miguel De La Torre, who studied with Glen at Southern Seminary, examines Glen's thicker Jesus and concludes that Glen's Jesus was still too white, and that there is no redeeming a white Jesus. De La Torre's chapter initiates in this volume a searching examination of race in the work of Glen Stassen.

Stacey Floyd-Thomas offers a "vastly darker and a lot larger" PHAT Jesus as she engages Glen Stassen's thicker Jesus. This is christology, and biblical ethics, in a womanist vein, taking seriously Glen's Jesus but also pointing out limits tied to his social location.

George Hunsinger offers a biblical treatment of same-sex relationships and reflects on the potential and limits of incarnational discipleship in this regard.

Hak Joon Lee, Glen's colleague in Christian ethics at Fuller Seminary at the end of Glen's career (and life), carefully probes Glen's hermeneutics and rendering of the biblical story. He concludes that incarnational discipleship would be strengthened by a much stronger integration of the covenantal framework of the Bible.

Peter Paris examines white supremacy as the cultural ethos of the West, including the United States. Paris shows that the United States comprehensively, and therefore in culture, politics, and religion, is infected by white supremacy. This raises interesting questions for Glen's project.

Larry Rasmussen tests Glen's late incarnational discipleship ethics against the reality of human-induced climate change and the catastrophic threat it poses to humanity and the creation. This implicates questions of christology as well as social ethics.

Ron Sanders, a former doctoral student of Glen's, tackles his political theology and understanding of American democracy, arguing that, while Glen's overall approach to the origins of American democracy as well as his way of discussing the posture of the church in relation to public life constituted a serious engagement in the tradition of democratic discourse, it also needs to be challenged.

Peter Sensenig, another former doctoral student of Glen's, explores incarnational discipleship through consideration of Peter's on-the-ground ministry context in majority-Muslim Africa. This essay engages a different literature in missiology, and it also offers what might be described as a practical incarnational ethic.

Reggie Williams offers a searching examination of Glen's treatment of race. Reggie suggests that Glen's understanding of white racism was underdeveloped, and that Glen missed the opportunity to engage critical race theory as it was developing. Reggie suggests an anthropological-aesthetic corrective.

Finally, David Gushee reflects on Glen's life and work in light of all the essays, considering major themes that can be discerned in Glen's work and in the collection—including Jesus, scripture, church, politics, democracy, and race. David considers Glen's overall

career trajectory as well as what he was trying to do with the concept of incarnational discipleship. In the end, David asks about the continued relevance of Glen's moral vision in these radical days, now more than five years since his death.

We are deeply grateful to you for having selected this book to read.