Contents

01 Introduction
The Thread of Justice

04 Love, Extended
Human Justice Begins with God

06 Do Not Be Afraid
Upholding Justice in Hostile Circumstances

08 A Tranquil Sea and Worship
A Christian Social Justice Manifesto

09 Why Pursue Justice?
The Bible Tells Me So

12 Scripture is Not Google Maps
The Necessity of Traditions

15 Attend to your Neighbour
Justice Right Next Door

18 A Plural Pursuit
Pursuing Justice as a Community
Introduction

THERE ARE PLENTY OF SKEPTICS OF SOCIAL JUSTICE THESE DAYS.

Many, witnessing the fever swamps of university campuses and the chaos and violence of antifa movements, have decided to just chuck it. So-called “Social Justice Warriors” are off their rockers, and we should treat them the way we’d treat a mad bull. Some opt for a policy of avoidance, while others—think of the work by magazines such as *Quillette*—opt to meet the rampaging creatures head-on.

Similar postures are present in the church in North America. This is especially true among various confessional churches, who often see social justice as a Trojan horse under which liberal social and ethical agendas will be smuggled...
But this is only true if social justice is defined and lived out in ways that are antithetical to 2000 years of Christian social thought and action and the historical witness of the church. But social justice need not be defined that way. There are good, theologically sound, reasons to embrace social justice. Here’s why.

To ignore, downplay, or castigate justice within the living witness of the church is akin to doing the same with other controversial parts of theology: substitutionary atonement, for instance. I recall a biblical studies professor of mine from graduate school who, discomforted by the attributes of God that accompany various theories of atonement, interpreted scripture in a way that diminished the sacrifice of the Lamb of God, bracketed the atonement, and muted the church’s long tradition relating to Christ’s death. I see similar squirming and wriggling amongst those who would deny or downplay the centrality of justice in the life of the church today. Indeed, the commonality between my professor and opponents of social justice is, in some strange way, a discomfort with God’s justice.

Our polarized culture often drives opposing sides to look and act as mirror images of each other, and the debate about social justice is a case in point. You can work hard to cut the thread of justice that runs from the book of Genesis to Revelation, and which is captured in Reformed and catholic confessions and the lives of the saints through the ages. You can ignore it; you can pretend it’s not there; you can attempt to blunt the sharpness of God’s word; you can try to douse the holy fire that accompanies the execution of justice in scripture, or to mute the strain and anguish of the voices in scripture that cry out for justice. But after all of your efforts, justice remains—in the embrace of peace, ready to be picked up by the downtrodden who read God’s word; ready to startle those of us sitting comfortably on our dragon-hoard of wealth to obey God’s command; ready to provide all with hope and encouragement.
If God’s justice—his rod and his staff—comforts the righteous and allows them to face evil without fear, what does it say about those of us who find his rod and staff uncomfortable?

The Westminster Shorter Catechism does not say, “God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, cough cough, goodness, and truth.” He is unchangeable in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth.

Love, Extended

IF TO BE A CHRISTIAN IS TO ENCOUNTER CHRIST, THAT ENCOUNTER CANNOT BUT BE EXTENDED.

Justice means giving God his due: our love. And our love of God cannot but be extended to the love our neighbours who bear his image. Encountering God is always made manifest within communal life. And the whole array of those communities—which the political community is one—is our social life.

And it is here that we encounter a need for a Christian ethic of properly loving our neighbour within that complex array of relationships. How do we understand that task?

If the goal of a Christian is union with Christ, then individual Christians and the Christian church—the body of Christ—should strive to be just and to be seen as just by her members, those who see her, pass her by, and interact with her, pagan or otherwise. We should recall the words of Proverbs 21:15: “When justice is done, it is a joy to the righteous but terror to evildoers.” Or, hear the words of warning for those who would shunt justice aside: “Cursed be anyone who perverts the justice due to the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow.” To love justice is, as Psalm 33:5 tells us, to love what God loves.

WHY IS IT THAT MANY OF US NATURALLY AND INSTINCTUALLY BELIEVE THAT TO PURSUE JUSTICE IS TO GIVE UP ON GOD, THE CHURCH, ITS CREEDS, ITS EVANGELICAL MISSION?

My hunch is that many who are otherwise skeptical of social justice within the church would have no trouble assenting above. The trouble comes not when we come to terms with the fact Scripture tells us to do justice, but in how we discuss and define justice, and on what grounds we call the church to account.

If this is true, what causes us to fear that a church concerned with social justice will lead to churches which sell their evangelical birthright for a mess of political pottage? Why is it that many of us naturally and instinctually believe that to pursue justice is to give up on God, the church, its creeds, its evangelical mission? On what grounds must we hold that care for the poor and the weak—and to believe that the state has some role to play in that care—is to adopt liberalism, progressivism, or some other “ism”? Is that line of thinking necessary? Does it necessarily follow? Why is it that rather than critiquing liberalism (theological and political) as a unique artifact of the idol factories that are our hearts, we throw the juridical baby out with the ideological bathwater?
Do Not Be Afraid

I WONDER IF WE FEAR.

Perhaps we fear because many who profess Christ have forgotten that we have been given authority, and have thus turned to other authorities to guard ourselves against the suffering that we are told will come when we are faithful to God in a wicked and sinful world.

In short, perhaps some have not just suppressed the call for justice in the scriptures, but have done so because they have neglected to inwardly digest a constant refrain of God to his people in scripture: “Do not be afraid.”

To be clear: I understand the concerns. As a Canadian who has seen a slow and steady restriction of the freedoms of conscience and religion in Canada (and perhaps worse someday), I am under no illusion that a polity philosophically committed to choice-maximization for individuals will be anything but arbitrary and blunt in the long-run. Indeed, I sometimes wonder if the arbitrary “justice” of our courts is an example of how a republic (or constitutional monarchy), understood in terms of a common acknowledgement of right and by a community of interests, ends up looking like a “band of brigands” and our nations as a “petty kingdom,” as Augustine puts it. But choice-maximization is not social justice. Why do we allow those who say it is to own the term?

It is hard to read any fear of justice in the church as anything other than a variation of the disciples midnight cry on the Sea of Galilee. North American Christians are in a political and social boat “tossed back and forth by
the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming.” And what does our fear of social justice as a Trojan horse say? “Lord, save us! We’re going to drown!”

To those who see the desire for social justice as a manifestation of cunningness and craftiness, let me speak the word of Jesus: “You of little faith, why are you so afraid?”

A Tranquil Sea and Worship:

A CHRISTIAN SOCIAL JUSTICE MANIFESTO

Some might respond, “cunning, craftiness, and deceit, are present among those wishing the church to take a more active role in pursuing justice,” and no doubt they can point to numerous cases where this has been true. I’m happy to grant that; we all know the churches that, under the guise of justice, have become baptized collectives of a given political party, left or right.

Theological movements within denominations advocating for one thing or another have begun to resemble political campaigns more than anything else—half-truths, fear-mongering and all. But to resist social justice because it is a tool of some other political program is to allow that political program to set the terms of the debate, to shape our actions and behaviours. It is to take one’s eyes off the Jesus Christ in the midst of a choppy sea.

Both those who consider social justice more important than the gospel and those who believe Christians can live lives transformed by that gospel without pursing justice will sink like stones. Indeed, I’m increasingly convinced that both the “justice without Jesus” people and the “Jesus without justice” people are enacting an instinctive drowning response—drowning together—grabbing each others’ necks, and pulling each other down into the deeps.

And who knows; perhaps some time in the belly of a fish is necessary?

Why Pursue Justice?

WHY SHOULD WE PURSUE JUSTICE?

Because it is an exercise of obedience. Or, to put it in slightly less legal terms, to act justly is to do the daily chores of the children of God who live in the household of God. Think of the Christian’s task in terms of this from 1 John 3:

See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!

This isn’t just for John’s immediate historical audience. This is a birth certificate held by all those who have been redeemed by Christ.
This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. 17 If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? 18 Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.

No social justice warriors could offer a more stirring manifesto, could they?

19 This is how we know that we belong to the truth and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence: 20 If our hearts condemn us, we know that God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. 21 Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God and receive from him anything we ask, because we keep his commands and do what pleases him. 22 And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us. 23 The one who keeps God’s commands lives in him, and he in them. And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us.

The epistle’s mention of the Holy Spirit brings to mind Oliver O’Donovan’s description of Christian action in the public realm. In Desire of the Nations, he writes that the person who is a child of the living God criticize[s] existing notions of political good and necessity, not only classical republican notions but imperial and theocratic notions, too, in the light of what God has done for the human race and the human soul. Public norms must be adjusted to the new realities when ordinary members of society may hear the voice of God and speak it in public, even, according to the prophet, men and women slaves. Ideas of what government is must be corrected in the light of that imperious government which the Spirit wields through the conscience of each worshipper. (DN 122-123)

While it may horrify liberal Christians to say this, justice is not, properly speaking, a this-worldly political matter. It is a matter of whom we recognize as worthy to govern. And if O’Donovan is right, the worthy one is the otherworldly and “imperious” Holy Spirit. The source of authority given to us to do justice is not democratic in the way we understand it—we do not elect our King. We receive “all authority on heaven and earth” from Jesus Christ, ascended and reigning at the right hand of the father. And we receive the power to exercise that authority, through his Spirit. The proper mode of speech in speaking of justice, therefore, is proclamation. Thus, doing justice is evangelical. Anything else is a miscarriage of what should be our new birth as sons and daughters of Christ.

I wonder if we might not be more convincing to our brothers and sisters who wish to divorce the gospel from justice if we were to speak in this proclaiming mode more often.

WE RECEIVE “ALL AUTHORITY ON HEAVEN AND EARTH” FROM JESUS CHRIST, ASCENDED AND REIGNING AT THE RIGHT HAND OF THE FATHER.

And I wonder if those who wish to absorb the gospel in pursuit of this-worldly justice might be more convinced of the importance and truth of the church’s creeds if they were to see the majesty and power of a community whose pursuit of justice was done as an extension of ultimate justice—the worship due to the God we confess in the creeds.

Perhaps, perhaps not. In any case, we should insist with Pope Benedict XVI that “being a Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction.” The new horizons that emerge out of that encounter—most powerfully in worship, sacraments, and prayer—
from the basis, lifeblood, and manifestation, of the justice that our “SJW” friends so deeply desire.

We should not be put off by the myriad ways—historically and presently—that Christians make a hash of justice and use God’s name to perpetuate injustice. We cannot see the abuse and conclude that the proper manner of approaching this is to adopt a liberal, “neutral,” conception of justice. But neither should we be hubristic. We should, as O’Donovan says, “presume neither that the Christ-event never occurred nor that the sovereignty of Christ is now transparent and uncontested.” As will become clear below, the contestation of what is just is absolutely critical to this pursuit, but justice is never neutral. Perhaps in our time and place, with our cultural history, our primary task is “overcoming the pretentiousness of the autonomous political order” premised on the autonomous individual.

Scripture is Not Google Maps

WE COULD GO WRONG—AND WE WILL TEND TOWARD HUBRIS—IF WE THINK THE SCRIPTURES GIVE US A CLEAR ROADMAP FOR

CONSTITUTIONAL GOVERNMENT AND A SET OF PRE-CAST LEGAL DECISIONS ABOUT VARIOUS ISSUES OF THE DAY.

Holy Scripture is not the same as a Supreme Court decision! And it is certainly not Google maps with the Holy Spirit mechanically telling us in some computerized voice to turn “left” here or “right” there.

Scripture does teach us about political authority, and about justice, but not always in the way that we want it to. As Brad Littlejohn notes in his essay “The Bible and the Religion of Protestants,” we should not “act as if Scripture did not merely contain all things necessary to salvation, but all things necessary in any sense, necessary to answer burning moral, ecclesiastical, or political questions [that trouble us].”
The words of Richard Hooker, in Book III of his *The Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, are pertinent:

When it comes to the deeds of God, our duty is merely to search out what He has done and to admire it with meekness, rather than to argue about what our reason dictates God should have done. The different ways in which God may do good to His Church are more numerous than we can imagine, and we cannot presume to judge which is best until, having first seen what He has in fact done, we may know it to be the best. If we do otherwise, surely we go too far and forget our place. Our pride must be restrained, and our arguments must be silenced by the words of the blessed apostle: “How unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past tracing out! For who hath known the mind of the Lord? or who hath been his counsellor?” (Rom. 11:33-34).

Paying particular attention to Hooker’s insistence on “the different ways in which God may do good to his church” is to recall that God works in ways too numerous to imagine.

It also reminds us that doing justice can only take place within a community of practice, a tradition. Our presentist sensibilities incline us to think of “tradition” as something gone. But for the church, it is also the living practice of the people of God, wherever they are found. Social justice for Chinese minister and prisoner of conscience Wang Yi and the Early Rain congregation in Szechuan China will be similar to and very different from social justice for the congregation in Charlottesville, a congregation in Nairobi from one in Hamilton, ON.

We will go nowhere in discerning how to pursue justice if we imagine ourselves as living outside of a tradition, outside of the discipline of the church of God in particular places. And we will certainly not do so if we ignore the long history and works of the church throughout the ages and in various places today.

**Attend to your Neighbor**

**ONE DIMENSION OF JUSTICE THAT ARISES OUT OF THE CHURCH’S TRADITION IS THE NEED TO ATTEND TO THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF THOSE NEAR TO YOU.**

To love your neighbour, you must first know your neighbor and your neighborhood.

I have been deeply influenced by the Christian social teaching of Leo XIII, Abraham Kuyper, and Martin Luther King Jr. And what is obvious in documents like *Rerum Novarum*, Kuyper on “The Social Question” and “On Manual Labour,” or any of Rev. King’s speeches is the extent to which they were intimately familiar with not just the struggles of the poor and the oppressed, but with the unique pressures that were placed upon them and the various fulcrums that were placing that pressure on them. Take the issue of segregation: there were a host of points—embedded socially, legally, economically,
and culturally—that separated black Americans from their fellow citizens: school boards, municipal bylaws, business practices and yes, even churches. All served as nodes that maintained and perpetuated what was a very clear violation of justice due to African Americans within the American constitution and in their being people made in the image of God. Likewise, Kuyper and Leo saw various laws, business practices, and even erroneous theologies as contributing to the plight of the working class in Europe at the turn of the 19th century.

Thankfully, these nodes also served as potential points of liberation. As they called the church to respond to these pressures, the gospel was a fountain of imagination for the societal relief of those pressures. They saw serious injustices and evaluated the various responses to those injustices that were on offer in their society. When they found those responses lacking, they offered in response new institutions, new ways of imagining communal life that were more aligned with the demands of the gospel. The “I have a dream” speech evokes not an imagined utopia, but a society made better by the destruction of the legal and social vices crushing African Americans. King and the others spoke authoritatively about the need for society to begin reimagining those who were suffering—to see them as Christ. If one reads Kuyper’s “On Manual Labor” and his calls for “councils of labour” you see an imaginative and nascent form of the labour unions that shaped Dutch economic culture, and which continue today.

In this way, they follow a long line of Christians. Dr. Susan Holman’s The Hungry are Dying: Beggars and Bishops in Roman Cappadocia shows the extent to which the combination of worship, preaching, and pursuit of justice for the poor combined to introduce historically new ways of organizing society, as well as the invention of institutions that we now consider normal, like hospitals. Christian responses to matters of social justice are opportunities to make the eternal gospel manifest.

The pursuit of justice in this way also provides one of the more compelling reasons for the maximization of religious freedom. I’ve noted above that Canada is steadily shrinking the space Christians of conscience are given to act. The restriction of the freedoms of both conscience and religion is an attempt on behalf of some to abort the social potentialities of seriously religious people.

I say attempt because, if we’re living rightly, our imaginative responses to injustice should arise even in the case of persecution if it ever comes; perhaps such persecution might even play the role that forest fires play in the lives of blazing star, wild lupine, and sandplain gerardia—clearing the way for new life. To quote Wang Yi, “we must act and speak with the same courage and uprightness” whether we are being persecuted or not. “When we are not being

“WHEN WE ARE NOT BEING PERSECUTED, WE SPREAD THE GOSPEL. AND WHEN PERSECUTION COMES, WE CONTINUE SPREADING THE GOSPEL.”
persecuted, we spread the gospel. And when persecution comes, we continue spreading the gospel.”

Pursuing social justice as the church is a way for us, in a society not experiencing anything like the persecution that our brothers and sisters in China experience, to pick up our cross, to bear the burdens of others, and, in so doing, to be a channel for God’s grace to our society.

A Plural Pursuit

ATTENDING TO THE VARIOUS FULCRA IN THE LIVES OF THOSE WHOM CHRIST ANOINTED US TO SERVE ASSUMES THE PRESENCE OF VARIOUS FIXED POINTS WITHIN OUR SOCIETY.

If you are attending to your neighbor and your neighborhood, you will quickly have to attend to the variety of loci of power in those places. This is not a theoretical exercise. Whether we are discussing housing, prisons, municipal zoning boards, or any other civic institution or social program, there will be organized and unorganized communal manifestations of human life using, and abusing, power. And Christians attending to their neighbors will have to think hard about the unique competencies and jurisdictions of various communal manifestations of human life, what we have learned in various scientific disciplines, and our responses to the ways in which they use or abuse power will have to be plural as well.

Pursuing justice will of course mean living just lives within families, in friendships or mentoring relationships, through programs organized by churches or in civil society—with young fathers or kids who didn’t have dads. But it will also mean examining how our political community governs family lives. As Kevin Den Dulk notes: politics matters. Is divorce too easy to obtain? Does our criminal system’s emphasis on imprisonment disproportionately affect children who are missing their fathers? Do our employment relationships, and the employers who shape them, prevent parents from exercising their duties as parents? All of these are questions of justice. While not all of these questions are questions of public justice that the state is responsible for, some of them are.

Justice is not just the giving of due within communities, but the proper and peaceful ordering of relationships among communities. Part of our task as Christians is pursuing justice within each realm’s respective bounds and ensuring that each area of human life—and the communities that form to support that life—are not absorbed by other institutions. We must explore the ways in which these institutions can support and enable each other to achieve their ends.

Social justice means a society which, like the water after Jesus spoke to the storm, is marked by peace. And peace, to borrow from Augustine, is not simply the absence of war, but the tranquility of order.
A church marked by the confidence that all of these communities, and all of the people within them, are held in the loving hand of God, can approach this work with the tranquility that marks those who have been left with, and given, peace.

I’d like to end with an example of this confident peace written by the trustees of Salem Bible Chapel, the church of Harriet Tubman and the terminus for some many journeys on the Underground Railroad. Note the quiet confidence of a church in which justice has been present from the start. And note its recognition that, without proper worship, there is not and can never be justice.

I like to think of it as a letter to the secular social justice warrior that acts as an invitation to join the church in this great work.

Dear Reader,

We wish to express our thanks to you for your interest in our most famous member, Harriet Tubman and the African American freedom seekers who built the Salem Chapel and their connection to the legendary Underground Railroad. We too are just as enthusiastic, if not more so, because we are the guardians of their honourable memory and custodians of the church. However, it is important that you know that our first priority is to serve our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, because that is what we believe Sister Tubman and all other past members would want us to do.

We realize that this may be difficult for some of you to understand and that some of you may disagree with us, however, please recognize that this is our position and it is also our prerogative. There will be no argument relating to this matter, because we understand that our forefathers built the church to praise the Lord, not themselves. We also do not believe that they would want us to place them above God.

We believe that the only time Sister Tubman would have missed attending a Sunday Worship Service, whether she was in the US or Canada, is when she was guiding fugitives to freedom or if she was ill. No matter what the Sunday circumstance may have been, we believe that Sister Tubman would have taken the time to give thanks to the Lord as she did on a daily basis.

The Salem Chapel is a functional church and we do hold a public worship service every Sunday, therefore, we operate very differently from a museum, interpretive centre, etc., because our first priority is to serve the Lord…

As we pursue justice, let that be our first priority too.
WHAT ARE “DAVENANT DIGESTS?”

Davenant Digests seek to bring the church’s past into clear focus for Christians today, and use it to shed light on the challenges of the church’s present. Written in a clear, lively, and down-to-earth style, these short introductions aim to answer questions that ordinary Christians have, in terms that ordinary Christians will want to read.

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