

Why Equality Is Not Enough:
The Theological Significance of Social Justice

By

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Abstract

This paper addresses the need for dialogue within the Church of the Nazarene concerning the issue of justice and the related mission of the church. I argue with Daniel Bell that justice conceived of in terms of individual rights or redistribution of goods is too narrow and negative a definition. To comprehend the fullness of God's justice, this definition must be expanded and reframed by the biblical witnesses. Therefore, I conclude with an examination of Luke 4:16-21 and the mission of justice Jesus proclaims in this passage, which is oriented toward the eschatological kingdom of God already fulfilled in Jesus. By reframing God's justice in terms of God's kingdom, the church can begin thinking toward and embodying Jesus' mission of justice in this world as well.

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I

Social justice has reemerged in the church's contemporary missional dialogue, and within the Church of the Nazarene in particular, this recycled term has evoked strong, antipodal reactions. On the one hand, social justice advocates have drawn upon rich resources of the Christian tradition, including certain historically mindful interpretations of scripture, church liturgies, and liberation theology, to demonstrate the practical, material relevance of Christianity for those who suffer various injustices under the weight of society. Social justice is necessary, they believe, because of God's "preferential option for the poor" (qtd. in Gutierrez 1988, xxv-xxvi)—which first must be understood literally and not merely as a spiritual category. Social justice thus involves meeting the basic physical needs of people and fighting systemic evils that deprive people of life in various ways.

On the other hand, another camp within the Church of the Nazarene views the work of social justice warily. Indeed, this camp seems to have inherited the perspective of D.L. Moody at the end of the nineteenth century. According to George Marsden, Moody began to shy away from the evangelical emphasis on social reform because in his experience, evangelism became secondary to his social involvement with the needy. As he held the Bible in one hand and a loaf of bread in the other, people only reached for the bread. As Marsden says, "In [Moody's] mind it was certainly not a question of condoning a lack of compassion for the poor; rather he was convinced that the most compassionate possible care was for a person's eternal soul. Furthermore, evangelism was, according to his theology, the best way to meet social needs....[I]ndividual conversions would eventually bring social reform" (2006, 37). This more conservative

position adopted by Moody and other revivalists only grew stronger as the Social Gospel became prominent at the turn of the twentieth century. Marsden describes this reaction as stemming from an identification of “social Christianity” with “liberalism” (2006, 91). To conservative evangelicals more inclined toward Moody’s attitude, “the Social Gospel emphasized social concern in an exclusivistic way which seemed to undercut the relevance of the message of eternal salvation through trust in Christ’s atoning work” (Marsden 2006, 92). Some Nazarenes today seem equally suspicious of social justice because they understand Christianity and salvation to involve more than the satisfaction of physical needs. The transformation of life that is accomplished through Christ is infinitely greater than we can effect through our human resources.

While both perspectives on social justice are united in missional desire, they both affirm a false dichotomy between personal, spiritual salvation and social action. These positions need not be divorced from one another; in fact, they must be united in a Christian understanding of the salvation of God. While both camps continue to talk past one another in this way, even if each is only trying to place the emphasis differently, the conversation inevitably fails to get started. Social justice advocates within the Nazarene church rightly highlight the conservative¹ error in claiming that only a few are called to help and stand in solidarity with the poor while the entire church is called to the spiritually poor and sinful. Simultaneously, more conservative Nazarenes rightly gesture toward the potential danger of a social justice mission to reduce the church to a political agenda or nonprofit organization, giving only a nod to Christian doctrine and theology.

¹I use this label in spite of its pejorative connotations in keeping with Marsden’s work. “Conservative” is simply meant to contrast those more actively driven by social justice concerns, which inadvertently tend to be labeled more “liberal.” Neither label is helpful, and I will gladly change the terminology used here if given better words to convey similar thoughts (without the baggage attached).

Moreover, both positions fail to recognize the limited—and thus problematic—definition of justice they both seem to uphold. Justice, for both camps, is conceived narrowly as a “guarantor of rights” (Bell 2001, 4), leveling of the playing field, or wiping the slate clean. Conservative Nazarenes tend to employ justice in terms of the spiritual atonement; God’s justice is sufficiently met in Christ for a sinful individual, and by accepting Christ’s atonement, an individual is cleansed of her sins and therefore is spiritually justified before God. Ironically, a similar view of justice is deployed by social justice advocates, but instead of situating justice within the context of spiritual atonement, this camp strives for just ordering of society in accordance with what it believes the coming kingdom of God to enact: redistribution of material goods so that no one is left hungry, needy, suffering, or oppressed. In either case, whether given a spiritual or material bent, justice becomes a negative concept, limited to neutralization or leveling of life in some way. However, justice so defined does not sufficiently describe the justice of God, which involves an overwhelming positive element of giving abundant life, not simply settling for making life as we know it equal for all in terms of either a spiritual or material economy.

What I hope to propose in this paper, therefore, is a need not for a middle ground between two extreme positions, but for a broadening of both positions until they can encompass one another. The aim of this paper is to reframe justice theologically so that it does not force the church into a spiritual/physical division, but can instead make space for discussion concerning the justice of God and the mission of the church. I wholeheartedly believe that the church must incarnate a mission of social justice in this world, but only on the basis and in the power of God’s justice in God’s kingdom, which

transforms the entire cosmos, spiritually and materially. Thus, the ultimate purpose of social justice, which may indeed require redistributing goods in society, is not only to remove social, economic, political, and ideological barriers that divide people—by feeding the poor, extending hospitality to the homeless, welcoming women and ethnic minorities, tending to the elderly and sick, among many other things—but also to actively unite people and witness to the new, holistically life-giving community God’s kingdom inaugurates as God’s justice breaks into this world.

To explicate these ideas, I will begin with a discussion of Daniel Bell’s analysis of social justice in the context of liberation theology, which will demonstrate the insufficiency of limiting justice to redistribution of goods. Then I will offer a reflection on Luke 4:14-21, highlighting the theological nuances and implications of the mission Jesus adopts here in relation to the kingdom of God. Finally, I will suggest that the mission of Jesus, which also is to be the mission of the church, entails a broader understanding of justice exemplified by the intentions of Jubilee and the kingdom of God, which ultimately restore and re-create relationships between people as well as between God and all of creation. Thus on the basis of God’s cosmic, re-creative justice, which makes all things—including human community—new, all members of the Church of the Nazarene may be able to find common ground to come together as one body to discuss patiently and prayerfully ways of incarnating the mission of Jesus and justice of God in this world.

II

Why Equality Is Not Enough

Redistribution of Social Goods: Bell's Critique of Modern Justice

In *Liberation Theology After the End of History*, Daniel Bell offers a philosophical and theological critique of “savage capitalism,” decriing its sinful structuring of human desire and suffering on a global scale (2001, 2-3). What is required for Bell is a Christian reshaping of desire through the church, and he situates this Christian response to capitalistic desire in the context of justice, particularly as it is invoked by the Catholic Church and liberation theologians, to combat the injustice of capitalism. He ultimately argues for “a reconsideration of the place and function of justice, reconceived in terms of the aneconomic order of the divine gift of forgiveness, in the Christian life” (2001, 5).

In considering if justice can counter capitalism both theologically and practically, Bell recognizes the plurality of ways justice can be conceived and implemented, and so essentially begins by asking, “What justice?” (2001, 101). Because, as Bell says, “some accounts of justice may underwrite social orders that create and perpetuate the very poverty and misery that liberationists seek to combat” (ibid), an appeal to justice is insufficient in itself to resist capitalism. Even to narrow the concept to social justice does not render its meaning any more lucid. Therefore, Bell launches into a historical examination of justice as it has been defined by the church tradition.

As early as Thomas Aquinas, justice is viewed as willing and acting that each person receives her right (Bell 2001, 102). For Aquinas, however, justice is not simply conflated with human rights; rather, it functions to designate a “general” as well as a

“particular virtue” (ibid). Generally understood, justice “coordinates the proper good or end of individual persons with the common good or end of the human community” (ibid). Justice aligns personal good with the good of all persons together—not as a blind arbiter of opposing forces, but as “a principle of unity that arises out of the source of all unity, the shared love called the common good” (Bell 2001, 103). Thus this more general aim of justice is less concerned with “a calculus of what is due” (ibid) to each person and more embedded in promoting loving community of all persons.

In contrast to medieval conceptions and practices of justice, Bell believes that modern justice has taken the form of a “fundamentally distributive force that secures rights in societies distinguished by the absence of anything but the thinnest of conceptions of the common good” (ibid). With the rise of nineteenth century liberalism, justice became the concern for the “temporal good of the secular state” (2001, 104), and the birth of social justice in Christian circles failed to maintain Aquinas’ expansive understanding of justice, instead substituting the common good for “the sum total of individual goods” to be distributed to individuals in society (ibid). Eventually the language of individual rights gained precedence; instead of upholding Aquinas’ view of right as “a matter of consent to or participation in the divine order” (which resonates more with the Christian understanding of righteousness), social Catholics, Bell says, believed “God’s right established discrete rights possessed originally by individuals...and then derivatively by communities” (2001, 105). In short, justice became “the guarantor of [proprietary individuals’] rights” (ibid). Such rights may still be acknowledged as the gifts of God (2001, 109), but the focus remains on the individual and the goods due her.

The problem with this shift, according to Bell, is that justice framed in terms of individual rights establishes and maintains divisions between individual persons, as well as between an individual and society as a whole. Society, in fact, is simply an artificial construct, made up of the conglomerate of individuals. Justice no longer stems from the shared love of community, and as Bell says, “[w]ithout the shared love, the general virtue of justice has no end and hence is defunct; one is left with only the particular virtue of justice in its distributive and commutative dimensions” (2001, 110). For Bell in the context of his project, the problem with this limited Christian understanding of justice is its failure to reshape desire as it flows in the hands of the modern nation-state or contemporary global capitalism.

In the twentieth century, liberation theology rightly critiqued the practical impotence of the modern shift to individual rights language, but nevertheless failed to seek a different understanding of justice. In liberation theology, which arguably may be more justified than other theological discourses to speak of rights when they are being denied to oppressed people, justice is moved beyond abstract acknowledgment of universal human rights by its orientation toward the poor and meeting basic needs for survival. According to liberation theologians, justice can only prevail over savage capitalism if the rights of the poor become primary, and this perspective is theologically baptized² by biblical accounts of God’s deliverance of the poor and oppressed (Bell 2001, 112-122). However, since liberation theology was and is still bound to justice as arbiter of rights, even it cannot sufficiently combat savage capitalism, precisely because “justice as a matter of rights is not radical enough” (Bell 2001, 126) for several reasons.

²This phrase must be attributed to Fernando Segovia, professor of New Testament at Vanderbilt University, who used it frequently in the liberation theology course I took with him in the spring of 2004.

First of all, redistribution of goods to the poor can easily become another way of promoting capitalistic desire, either by perpetuating the development theory of capitalism that maintains economic hierarchy or by enabling more people to have greater buying power (Bell 2001, 126). Secondly, limiting justice to rights only allows the cessation of inequality; the concept remains negative, which is to say that justice cannot function positively to produce the shared love of community (Bell 2001, 127). Thirdly, no amount of redistribution of goods can counterbalance the injustices suffered by so many people through the oppressive operations of capitalism (Bell 2001, 129). Finally, based on liberation theology's appeal to the justice of God, redistribution of goods is also theologically insufficient to account for what God does in relationship to humanity (as well as to the entire fallen world). In fact, by giving humanity what is not due us through Christ's atonement, Bell believes "God redeems humanity *from* justice" (2001, 131)—at least as it has been narrowly defined since the dawn of modernity. Therefore, Bell proposes forgiveness as "the condition of possibility for justice" (2001, 186), moving beyond rights language toward the formation of an aneconomic, reconciled and reconciling community. He bases the practical merit of this argument on ecclesial communities of the oppressed formed in Latin America, which identify with Christ as "the crucified people" (2001, 166) and thus extend forgiveness to oppressors. In so doing, they "den[y] the destructiveness of injustice the final word, instead insisting that something else is always possible" (2001, 152-153).

This powerful testimony embodied by these Latin American witnesses must not be ignored. By situating his call for the church to become a body that forgives within the Latin American context, Bell makes a compelling argument for moving beyond rights

language toward a justice that flows out of forgiveness and the love of the community. While there is not space enough to work through the intricacies of Bell's constructive proposal, two things must be mentioned for the purposes of this paper.

First of all, Bell notes the risk involved in forgiveness; indeed, "the refusal to cease suffering" demonstrated in forgiveness may result in unceasing suffering for poor and oppressed people (2001, 189-193). What is more, the extension of forgiveness does not guarantee that forgiveness will be received, and within the context of Latin America, until its global (and local) oppressors receive that forgiveness through conversion, according to Bell's argument, their acts of forgiveness will not be fulfilled (2001, 164). Ultimately, Bell sees a kind of "power-in-vulnerability" (qtd. in 2001, 191) displayed by these communities that places its "wager on God" (2001, 195) instead of on modern justice concerned with rights and balancing injustice. Again, while this seems to be exactly what is needed in the world today, the danger remains that instead of a power-in-vulnerability, poor and oppressed ecclesial communities will only be vulnerable—not because of God's failure, but because of the failure of their oppressors.

Secondly, in relation to the first potential problem in Bell's project, forgiveness may make possible the formation of community in theory, but I am not sure that the language of forgiveness can be practically efficacious for communities in other parts of the world, particularly in the context of North America. For a fair number of Protestant evangelical churches, including the Church of the Nazarene in America, I would argue, forgiveness is situated in a spiritual, and typically individualistic, discourse divorced from communal formation.³ Even if Bell is right concerning the way forgiveness should

³It would be interesting to see if my criticism failed to apply to the Church of the Nazarene in developing and underdeveloped countries around the world.

function, currently his view is not the normative way forgiveness operates in the American Church of the Nazarene, and to shift the deeply embedded language and theology surrounding forgiveness would at the very least require a great deal of time and patience. While I do not wish to discount the value of such an endeavor, I only wish to indicate that forgiveness does not communicate the same ideas and practices in the Church of the Nazarene in North America as it seems to in ecclesial communities of Latin America. Therefore, from a practical standpoint, even forgiveness is not enough in the context of the Church of the Nazarene. It does not dispel language of rights and redistribution of goods,⁴ and finally, it remains a negative notion with no positive bearing on the formation of the church body and community of God's kingdom. In short, by accepting God's forgiveness, an individual's spiritual slate is wiped clean before God. Such an individual need not be part of a church body or change certain aspects of her daily life in this world in order to receive this eternal, otherworldly, spiritual good. To delve more deeply into the problems with this spiritualization of forgiveness associated with what I have termed the more conservative Nazarene stance toward social justice, let us detour to a brief discussion of atonement theory and theology with the aid of Joel Green and Mark Baker.

Spiritual Justice and Equality: Redistribution of Goods in Atonement Theology

While Anselm's theory of atonement must be contrasted with a strict penal substitutionary view, it is nevertheless subject to similar criticisms. In particular, both theories require satisfaction of something due God, thus falling prey to imposing rights language upon God, and neither offers anything constructive beyond this satisfaction

⁴Here I stand at odds with Bell's interesting reading of Anselm and substitutionary atonement theories. The next section will illuminate my argument.

concerning Christian community or the kingdom of God. Moreover, both leave room for divine sanctioning of abuse and oppression. Therefore, forgiveness remains a negative concept, and insofar as forgiveness connotes either atonement theory for the Church of the Nazarene,⁵ it cannot adequately convey the re-creative justice of God that Bell desires, nor can the church understand the fullness of the mission to which it has been called in this world through Christ. To demonstrate these claims, we must briefly examine both theories and the assessments Green and Baker give of each in *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*.

Green and Baker believe Anselm's medieval feudal context to be crucial for understanding his atonement theory. The primary drive for atonement in Anselm's theory corresponds to the feudal system of "honor and satisfaction" (2000, 127). Humans have violated the honor of God through sin, similarly to a vassal violating the honor of her lord. God's honor must be restored, but because of sin, humans are powerless to satisfy God's honor through their own merits. The one who chooses to restore the honor

⁵A much longer research project is necessary to draw all of the connections between the Church of the Nazarene and satisfaction atonement theories and then deduce the significance of those connections. For the sake of space, let me at least highlight several pertinent passages from the Articles of Faith, emphasizing the language that overlaps with modern views of justice: "**Atonement:** 6. We believe that Jesus Christ, by His sufferings, by *the shedding of His own blood, and by His death on the Cross*, made a full atonement for all human sin, and that this Atonement is the only ground of salvation, and that it is sufficient for every *individual* of Adam's race....**Prevenient Grace:** 7. But we also believe that the grace of God through Jesus Christ is freely bestowed upon all people, enabling all who will to turn from sin to righteousness, believe on Jesus Christ for *pardon and cleansing from sin*, and follow good works pleasing and acceptable in His sight....**Repentance:** 8. We believe that repentance, which is a sincere and thorough change of the *mind* in regard to sin, involving a sense of *personal guilt* and a voluntary turning away from sin, is demanded of all who have by act or purpose become sinners against God. The Spirit of God gives to all who will repent the gracious help of penitence of heart and hope of mercy, that they may believe unto *pardon* and spiritual life. **Justification, Regeneration, and Adoption:** 9. We believe that justification is the gracious and *judicial act* of God by which He grants *full pardon of all guilt and complete release from the penalty of sins committed*, and *acceptance as righteous*, to all who believe on Jesus Christ and receive Him as Lord and Savior."

of God while simultaneously redeeming humanity is the God-man, Jesus Christ, and only he as both God and human can truly satisfy the infinite debt due God (2000, 129-131).

The biggest critique Green and Baker pose to Anselm's theory is the way in which his cultural context trumps the biblical depiction of Jesus' crucifixion and atonement. Anselm's view distorts the relational aspects of sin and salvation by reducing the terms to a kind of debt-honor transaction. According to Green and Baker, "[t]he biblical concept of salvation places more emphasis on the reestablishment of communion with God and entering a discipleship community" while "[t]he emphasis on meeting the debt to the honor of the offended lord places little importance on the relationship itself and gives no attention to the impact a restored relationship with God will have on a person's relationship with others" (2000, 132). Additionally, by imposing medieval feudalism upon the actions of God, Anselm does not leave room for God to be the primary "actor" in saving humanity, as well as the entire cosmos (2000, 134). Finally, the theory does not attend to the ways in which Jesus' life and death may call into question the feudal system of honor and debt. Thus Green and Baker claim that Anselm's work leaves open the possibility of "providing divine sanction for the subjugation of human subjects on whose backs the system was built" (2000, 135-136).

Although penal substitutionary atonement also employs the idea of satisfaction, this concept becomes situated within the modern legal context instead of medieval feudalism. The paradigmatic penal substitution atonement advocate is nineteenth century theologian Charles Hodge, who argues that the justice of God demands punishment for human sin. The only way to satisfy human guilt and punishment and maintain God's justice is for God to punish Christ as the perfect substitute for all sinners. Instead of

Christ voluntarily sacrificing his life to pay human debt, Green and Baker note that “Hodge believes God orchestrated Jesus’ suffering and death on the cross” (2000, 143). To be saved, then, humans only need accept the substitution made by Christ, who died in our place and freed us from suffering the punishment due us.

The primary problem with Hodge’s theory, according to Green and Baker, is his failure “to allow the Bible itself to shape the way [he] think[s] about those terms [justice, judgment, biblical sacrifice, and God’s wrath]” (2000, 146). The way in which Hodges uses justice, based on modern criminal legal systems, stands in stark contrast to the way in which the justice of God is demonstrated throughout Scripture. For Green and Baker, God’s justice is “covenantal and relational and almost synonymous with faithfulness” (2000, 147), but for Hodges, modern legal justice dictates God’s action toward humanity. In fact, such justice leaves no room for grace, forgiveness, or resurrection, which are central to the Christian narrative; instead, God remains “vindictive”—simply substituting Christ as the victim of God’s wrath for the rest of humanity (2000, 147-148). Finally, this theory reinforces an individualistically oriented, spiritual/worldly dichotomy; as Green and Baker say, “[d]escribing the atonement as a legal transaction within the Godhead removes it from the historical world in which we live and leaves it unconnected to personal or social reconciliation” (2000, 149). As a result, salvation may have no bearing whatsoever on a person’s life, and when this practical effect is juxtaposed with the vindictive image of God, such a theory can serve to justify abuse and oppression. After all, all individuals are made spiritually equal before God through Christ; inequalities in worldly life cease to matter so working toward social change is

extraneous—at least to those in privileged positions. Elsa Tamez gives evidence to this situation in Latin America; as Bell tellingly says of Tamez’s experience,

The essential components of the doctrine [of justification by faith], including the forgiveness of sins, liberation from guilt, and reconciliation with God, have been adopted in Latin America in a form that generally renders them good news for the oppressors while harming the poor....The doctrine of justification by faith has meant that oppressors could be pardoned of their sins and relieved of their guilt without confronting the judgment of God or feeling the need for conversion or any change of practice. (2001, 160)

In the end, neither Anselm’s satisfaction theory nor Hodge’s penal substitutionary theory serve as sufficient models of forgiveness and justice. In both constructions, these concepts remain abstract and negative, concerned only with satisfying (and thus cancelling) a debt due either to God in the form of honor or to humans in the form of punishment. The language of dues binds forgiveness and justice to a modern redistribution of goods, even though these primarily take the form of spiritual goods instead of socioeconomic goods. Forgiveness stays in the realm of the individual, and as a result, the church and kingdom of God only seem to be ancillary or derivative. Moreover, God is bound to human ideologies of justice in both theories, which denies God the possibility of moving justice beyond negative human limits. Theology so construed envisions God as the blind lady Justice holding golden scales, thus neglecting—and perhaps unwittingly opposing—the biblical witnesses to the positive, re-creative justice of God that goes beyond equality in terms of distribution of goods, spiritual or material. Therefore, to come to a fuller, holistic understanding of God’s justice, let us now turn to the gospel of Luke.

III

The Mission of Jesus and the Justice of God in Luke 4:16-21

In Luke 4:16-21, the readers are given a script for Jesus' actions in the following chapters. In fact, Jesus' script derives from another script spliced together from Isaiah 58:6 and 61:1-2. The placement of this scene, as well as the edited quotation from Isaiah, are not accidental moves on the part of the gospel writer; rather, the central position given to Luke 4:16-21 (which may also include vv. 14-15 and 22-30) "suggests that the rest of the Lukan story should be read in light of this scene" (Tannehill 1996, 91; cf. Green 1997, 207).

Joel Green underscores several significant features of the structure of this passage. First of all, the Isaiah citation is framed by a chiasmus that begins in vv. 16-17 ("he stood up [to read]...he was handed...he unrolled") and ends in v. 20 ("he rolled up...he handed...he sat down") (1997, 209). Green highlights the absence of a parallel to the action of reading, which only further emphasizes Jesus' reading of Isaiah (1997, 209). Secondly, within the loose Isaiah quotation, Jesus omits one phrase from Isaiah 61:2, "the day of vengeance of our God," and then inserts Isaiah 58:6, "to send forth the oppressed in release" (qtd. in 1997, 210). Moreover, the word *release* appears twice, and the direct object pronoun referring to Jesus is repeatedly emphasized, which reiterate both the subject and action of Jesus' mission.

In light of the structure, Green offers three theological considerations of Jesus' selective interpretation of Isaiah, each of which are crucial in this present project for understanding the justice of God and a possible mission of social justice. The initial question that seems to surface in reading this passage revolves around the identity of "the

poor” in v. 18 (1997, 210). Indeed, this group of people plays a central part in Luke’s gospel, but to either broaden *the poor* to refer to the “spiritually poor” or narrow the group to only the “economically poor” distorts the way in which the cultural context of Luke’s gospel understands the term. As Green says, “one’s status in a community was not so much a function of economic realities, but depended on a number of elements, including education, gender, family heritage, religious purity, vocation, economics, and so on” (1997, 211). Therefore, *poor* is primarily a designation of low social status, brought about for a wide variety of reasons; ironically, then, even wealthy tax collectors could be identified as poor because of their lower status in society.

The key feature of the poor seems to be their marginal position or exclusion from society. The status of the poor is so low that they are pushed outside of social community, due to disease, disability, economic distress, nationality, and impurity, among other factors. The poor are not able to participate in the community and thus are “defined above all by their...exclusion” (Green 1995, 82). However, in this passage, contrary to the cultural exclusion of the poor, Green points out that Jesus first includes the poor in his proclamation of good news. Those who have been excluded from community are welcomed into Jesus’ community, and through this proclamation, “Jesus indicates his refusal to recognize those socially determined boundaries” (1997, 211) and thus releases the poor from their marginal status (1995, 82). Jesus’ self-proclaimed mission is fulfilled in this respect in the following chapters of Luke’s gospel, in which Jesus dines with tax collectors, Pharisees, and “sinners”⁶ (1995, 84-88).

⁶Green cites James Dunn’s work concerning the label *sinner*, saying, “[A] ‘sinner’ would be one whose behavior departs from the norms of an identified group whose boundaries are established with reference to characteristic conduct. That is, ‘sinner’ receives concrete explication especially in terms of group definition; a ‘sinner’ is an outsider” (1995, 85). Incidentally, Green also draws attention to the use of

The second theological implication of Luke 4:16-21 that Green illuminates is the function of the word *release*. This word can be understood to mean forgiveness of sins, which also “implies restoration to or entry into the community” (1997, 211-212). Through forgiveness, one is released from exclusion to reenter the community. Another important aspect of *release* is demonstrated in Jesus’ exorcisms and healings, in which people are released from the “binding power of Satan” and evil that would destroy their very bodies and lives (1997, 212). In this respect as well, *release* enables one to participate in the community as a restored person.

The third theological consideration stems from a final connotation of the word *release* in conjunction with the phrase “the year of the Lord’s favor,” referring particularly to “release from debts” and more generally to Jubilee practice. Every fifty years the Hebrews were commanded to give land back to its original owners, cancel debts owed to one another, free slaves from their service, and free the land from its annual labor of yielding a harvest (1997, 212). Not only was Jubilee tied to Sabbath keeping, insofar as it was to be “a reminder that God was sovereign over the land and that the reign of God entailed freedom from bondage” (1995, 78), but it became eschatologically significant as well, anticipating “the coming redemption from exile and captivity” (1997, 212; cf. Yoder 1994, 73). In this way, the kingdom of God enters into and becomes the mission of Jesus expressed in Luke 4:16-21. In keeping with God’s commands, Jesus is proclaiming cosmic release from bondage and entrance into a new cosmic community in which God reigns. Thus the poor are welcomed, the sick and disabled are healed, the blind receive sight, the possessed and imprisoned are delivered, and the estranged are

the label *sinner* in Luke 5:27-32, in which the Pharisees and teachers of the law call Jesus’ table companions “toll-collectors and *sinners*,” substituting the narrator’s use of *others* with *sinners* (1995, 85).

reconciled. Furthermore, the release proclaimed by Jesus and enacted in the inbreaking of God's kingdom not only restores all of creation, but also gives birth to "the time of joy and messianic celebration" (Hurtado 2004, 51). The restoration accomplished by God yields a "new creation," to borrow the words of I Corinthians 5:17. The barriers that separate people, as well as all living things, from one another are not only destroyed, but all of creation enters into joyful, harmonious, loving community through the overflowing *shalom* and *hesed* of God.

Lest the readers be tempted to view these eschatological implications as far beyond the present, the final words of Jesus in this Lukan passage are the following: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (v. 21). In spite of the ambiguous nature of this verse, Green says that "it is transparent that Jesus has in mind at least the realization of the hopes contained in the Isaianic citation" (1997, 214). Of equal importance is that this fulfillment seems to be identified with himself, which is to say that "with the onset of Jesus' ministry the long-awaited epoch of salvation had been inaugurated" (1997, 214) by Jesus himself as the one anointed of God. Jesus has declared that the time of Jubilee is present in him, and as he does indeed proclaim and grant release to the poor, the sick, the demon-possessed, the blind, the foreigners, and the estranged, the kingdom of God breaks into this world in an utterly transformative, life-giving way.

In the context of the current project, this passage in Luke proclaims the justice of God through the person of Jesus. The kingdom of God establishes the reign of God's justice, and within Luke 4:16-21, the shape this justice takes is release, restoration, and re-creation. The absence of God's vengeance in this passage is as telling as the inclusion

of God's favor, and from a theological perspective, one can claim that Jesus is identifying the justice of God displayed in God's kingdom with the grace of God extended in the Jubilee and given flesh in Jesus. Such justice moves beyond mere distribution of goods due to individuals or a negative balancing of the scales into the life-giving creation of a new, cosmically inclusive, loving community. God's justice is indeed God's favor and never-ending loving-kindness, which does not settle for equal distribution of spiritual or material goods, but in fact makes all things—spiritually and materially—new. Even the Jubilee call for returning land to its owners and cancelling debts—essentially wiping the slate clean—is commanded for the ultimate purpose of removing obstacles to the formation of God's new community in God's kingdom. In this way, then, the justice of God challenges modern human views of justice, for they do not make room for the loving community of God's kingdom.

IV

What, therefore, are we to make of social justice in particular and Christian practice of justice in general? We must begin by stating that as the mission of Jesus is devoted to the justice of God, so must those who would follow Jesus, namely the members of the church body together, adopt his mission of proclaiming God's justice. Indeed, such a mission is only possible for the church through Jesus' initial embodiment and fulfillment of it. As participants in God's new creation, already begun in Jesus, we are called to continue witnessing to God's transformative justice at work in this world.

Therefore, as I stated earlier, I wholeheartedly believe that the church must incarnate a mission of justice in this world, with all of its social and spiritual implications, precisely on the basis and in the power of God's justice in God's kingdom,

which transforms the entire cosmos, spiritually and materially. The ultimate purpose of social justice, which may indeed require redistributing goods in society, is not only to remove social, economic, political, and ideological barriers that divide people—by feeding the poor, extending hospitality to the homeless, welcoming women and ethnic minorities, tending to the elderly and sick, among many other things—but also to actively unite people and witness to the new, holistically life-giving community God’s kingdom inaugurates as God’s justice breaks into this world. Justice is an imperative because it is a gift of God’s kingdom. Apart from God’s loving, transformative sense of justice, the best we can hope for is equality through a redistribution of goods, either spiritually or socioeconomically. If we refuse to broaden and reframe these modern understandings of justice, whether conservative or liberal, instead of adopting the biblical testimony to God’s justice, how hard it will be to enter the kingdom of God (cf. Lk 18:24).

Therefore, on the basis of the new community God is forming in Jesus, and by relationship in the church, members of the Church of the Nazarene should and can begin dialoguing and praying for discernment concerning the ways in which God’s justice is at work in this world. If for no other reason than for the sake of the kingdom of God, this alone can give conservative Nazarenes and social justice advocates sufficient common ground for discussion and practice. My hope is that, as a church body, our eyes will receive sight to see God’s justice in action, our ears will be opened to hear the cries of injustice around us, and our feet will be released to move to those in need of the gracious justice of God.

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