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## Broken Lights: Seeing the Church Through Jesus' Call to Justice

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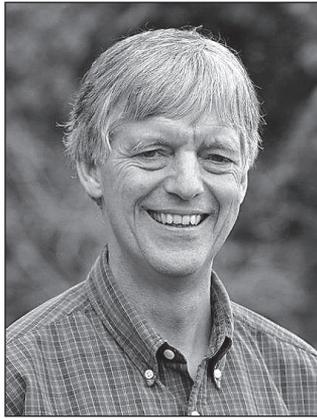
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**Editor's note:** Dr. Syd Hielema presented this paper as a public lecture at the Veritas Forum at Wilfred Laurier University, Brantford, Ontario, January 14, 2013.

# Broken Lights: Seeing the Church Through Jesus' Call to Justice

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by Syd Hielema

*Justice: the condition in which every creature in God's universe lives in its rightful place in God's creation, able to flourish as the Lord intended in that rightful place, and able to enhance the flourishing of all other creatures with whom it is in relation.*

In 1986, a movie called *The Mission* was nominated for seven Oscars, including best picture and best director, and it won the Oscar for cinematography. Its plotline, which was roughly based on historical events, goes like this: In the 1750s, a Spanish Jesuit priest named Father Gabriel (and played by Jeremy Irons) establishes a mission to the Guarani people in the South American jungle. The mission

becomes a place of safety, light, and hope for the Guarani. But Spain hands over this territory to the Portuguese, and the Portuguese wish to capture slaves from this region, so the Catholic church orders Father Gabriel to close or move the mission. He refuses, and the film ends with Father Gabriel and scores of Guarani children walking out of the mission into a hail of gunfire from Portuguese troops; they are massacred. As the movie ends, a message on the screen tells us that Jesuits and others continue to fight for the rights of indigenous peoples, followed by a biblical text, John 1:5: "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."

The church founded the mission. The church shone the light. The church then ordered the mission to move and tacitly sanctioned the Portuguese slave traders who carried out the massacre. The church gave permission to the darkness. Those facts point to the context for this title: "Broken lights—seeing the church through Jesus' call to justice."

Our times and context are very different from those of Father Gabriel, but the internal contradiction persists. In North America today, this contradiction is most immediately apparent in the public-relations gap between Jesus and evangelical Christianity. One researcher/pollster discovered that Jesus was widely perceived by the general public as an admired philanthropist, a good friend, or a cool uncle. On the other hand, Christians, those who follow Jesus, were considered to be ignorant, irrational, hateful, bigoted, hypocritical, fanatical,

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violent, even crazy. Ponder this: even though Jesus may not be well understood, he is widely respected and revered; and those who say that their lives are surrendered to him and that they desire to become more like him are often reviled.

This public-relations gap has particularly acute implications for university education today. A survey of 1300 university professors in the United States taken in 2007 discovered that three percent of professors held “unfavorable feelings” toward Jews, 22 percent toward Muslims, and 53 percent toward evangelical Christians.<sup>1</sup> Given that the percentage of evangelical Christians in the U. S. is significantly higher than it is in Canada, I would guess that in Canada the unfavorability ratings would be even higher than 53 percent. How might this condition affect university students? A few months ago, the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada released a mammoth landmark study of young adult faith titled “Hemorrhaging Faith,”<sup>2</sup> which concluded that a significant majority of children raised in Christian homes in Canada lose their faith during their university young adult years.

We have a problem—it’s not just a public-relations problem. We who are Christians are called to soul-searching, to ask ourselves why it is that we as a community do not share in the public perception of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

I’d like to suggest four theses that I hope will both help us as Christians to serve as a light in the darkness, as Father Gabriel did, and also help non-Christians understand the Christian call to justice more fully.

First, a definition: What do we mean by justice? Justice is the condition in which every creature in God’s universe lives in its rightful place in God’s creation, able to flourish as the Lord intended in that rightful place, and able to enhance the flourishing of all other creatures with whom it is in relation. In other words, justice makes room for all creatures to thrive.

The creation account recorded in Genesis chapter 1 ends with the Creator God surveying all that he had made and declaring, “it is very good.” That word “good” means good and just in every possible way. Everything is in its right place, contributing to the rightness of every other thing; i.e., blessing and flourishing flow from every part. The rocks and

trees, birds, fish, animals, and humankind all fit together. There’s a Hebrew word that captures this state of complete justice—the word “shalom.” This vision of a universe shaped by holistic justice animates the entire Bible, from the prophets of the Old Testament to the teachings of Jesus in the gospels and the visions of John of Patmos in the book of Revelation. This call to justice is central to the biblical narrative and the kingdom of God, and this call is embodied most fully and clearly in the person and work of Jesus Christ. With that in mind, let’s explore four theses about the call to justice in the Christian faith.

***Thesis #1: Jesus Christ embodies and points to a profoundly rich and comprehensive vision of justice.***

Pastor and author John Ortberg, speaking at Friends University in Wichita, Kansas, in September 2012, provided a rich historical reflection on the impact of Jesus upon global justice.<sup>3</sup> I will summarize his main points: Jesus of Nazareth had a three-year ministry rooted in a tiny backwater called Galilee, in which he held no official position of any kind and recruited disciples and followers who had no training or expertise of any kind. After three years, this no-name/no-position teacher was put to death. Logically, he should have disappeared inside the sands of time. Imagine that you could take a magnet and pull out of global history every single one of the benefits that flowed directly from his person and teaching and has accrued to human kind and the planet. Imagine that his influence could be removed from 2000 years by some kind of suprahistorical delete button. Well, says, Ortberg, the globe as we know it today would be utterly unrecognizable.

Ortberg continues by listing some of these benefits:

1. In Jesus’ day, every existing worldview assumed hierarchies of humanness, so that some folks were considered to be more fully human than others. For example, Romans were more human than non-Romans, free people were more human than slaves, men were more human than women, and the gods reinforced

this social hierarchy. Those at the top of the hierarchy were closer to the gods, so that the Christian creed “Jesus is Lord” was perceived as a direct challenge to the lordship of Caesar. Those at the bottom of the hierarchy were closer to the animals. By contrast, Jesus’ teachings and actions declared that every human life has worth and dignity, and this worth and dignity cannot be hierarchized. This utterly revolutionary and counter-intuitive thesis has radically shaped our globe ever since.

2. In Jesus’ day, every existing worldview taught that the weak and the sick did not deserve to live and ought to be shunned. Female infanticide was rampant. The handicapped had no place. Those with contagious diseases were feared and ostracized.

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Our youngest child was born with significant physical handicaps, and he absolutely loves history. I still remember the day when he was about ten years old and he cheerfully announced at the supper table, “did you know that if I had been born in ancient Sparta, they would taken me out to the woods on the day I was born and left me to die there?” In this context, Jesus devoted himself to healing the sick, specifically touching those with horribly contagious diseases like leprosy, and his followers were the ones who founded the first hospitals during epidemics, fed the hungry, took in outcasts, and founded communities in which those who were considered weak or foolish or poor or misfits by their world were welcomed, so that even Julian the apostate, an enemy of Christianity, admitted that the godless Galileans fed not only their (poor) but ours also.

3. In Jesus’ day, learning was considered the privilege of those who were the highest on the human hierarchy, males of wealth or social standing or exceptional intellectual ability. Jesus, by contrast, taught everyone indiscriminately, and early Christian worship services that included significant teaching included all social classes, both men and women, those of every ethnic background. Eventually the Christian worldview posited two key assumptions that served as foundations for learning: (1) Every human being has been created with capacities for learning and ought to learn as part of the call to live as the Image of God, and (2) we live in a universe created in an orderly fashion by its creator and therefore sufficiently knowable to be studied meaningfully. Universal education and the foundations of science and technology have been deeply influenced by the teachings and life of Jesus Christ and the biblical worldview.

In Luke’s gospel, we read an account in which Jesus declares the purpose of his mission. I’m reading from chapter 4:

He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. And he stood up to read. The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:

“The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him, and he began by saying to them, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.” (Luke 4.16-21)

Jesus is here reading from Isaiah 61, and in so doing he is telling us that there is a direct line, a clear trajectory, from the “it is very good” of Genesis 1 to the prophetic call in Isaiah 61 to Jesus’ mission statement in Luke 4 that continues on to the calling of those who follow Jesus today. Jesus extends this

trajectory to his followers in Matthew 25, when he declares, “whenever you fed the hungry, visited the sick, clothed the naked or cared for the prisoner, you were doing it unto me.”

Two closing comments on this first thesis. First, this is not to say that these three benefits—recognizing the worth of every human life, caring for the needy, and valuing learning—would not have developed without Jesus. It is to claim that his influence on these three significant goods is immense, even incalculable.

Second, we who are his followers have frequently failed in embodying these values in a sturdy manner, and I’ll have much more to say about that.

### ***Thesis #2: Jesus’ call to justice rules out purist ideology.***

After our first thesis, some of you may be thinking to yourselves somewhat skeptically, “Jesus debunked human hierarchies, reached out to the sick and the poor, and laid the foundations for universal education, but his twelve disciples were twelve Jewish males who were all healthy and appeared to be virtually unteachable much of the time, according to the gospel accounts. None of them were slaves, even though half of the inhabitants of the Roman empire were slaves.” So, it appears that the innermost circle of Jesus, which, by all accounts, should embody his values more clearly than anything else, undermines all three of the values I described.

And, if you’re thinking this, you’re absolutely right. I would invite you to listen as skeptically as you can because this will have to be a major point of discussion for us later on.

Jesus issues a radical call to justice, but he is not a purist ideologue. A purist ideology articulates a detailed vision of the way society must be structured, and then it forcefully seeks to bring about this vision in the present. For purist ideologies, the end justifies the means. The Taliban has no problem killing twelve-year-old girls on the way to school or nurses who travel from town to town hosting inoculation clinics. Christian purists justify bombing abortion clinics or advocating for economic policies that seem guaranteed to bring about a global depression that will especially hurt the poorest ones.

There are three problems with purist ideologies. The first is epistemological: they claim to know with absolute certainty every single detail of what a vision of perfect justice looks like. It’s all black and white, crystal clear. Jesus embodies radical justice in all that he does and is, but he does not ever lay out a detailed blueprint that describes the totally just society. A major theme of the Bible’s wisdom literature is that the wise person knows the limits of knowledge; the wise person has a sense of what those things are that cannot be known. Broken people living in a broken world are incapable of articulating in detail what a fully just society will look like. Paul recognizes this incapacity when he writes at the conclusion of his great love chapter in I Corinthians 13, “Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.”

Jesus’ call to justice is rooted in radical love, not ideology. When we are driven by our ideology, our ideology will take precedence over our love every time because we love our ideology more than we love our God or love our neighbor. Ideology becomes an idol. And the gospel message is, “be radical, live completely surrendered to the God who loves you and calls you to a life of justice, and know your limits. You cannot envision a perfect world. That’s not your calling; that is not your place.”

Second, purist ideologies deny historical process. The Christian faith is incarnational: it is a faith in a God who is present among us, God with us, God walking with us in our place in history, challenging us to know our place and our time and to embody his faithfulness in our place and our time. History is maddeningly messy; purist ideologies don’t have time for this messiness, but God does.

For example, Scripture tells us that God had compassion for the Hebrews groaning under the yoke of slavery in Egypt. But God did not snap his fingers and take the Hebrew nation out of slavery in Egypt. He spent 80 years preparing Moses to lead the Hebrew nation—first, by having him adopted into Pharaoh’s palace so that he grew up in the greatest political leadership training institute of the ancient world and, second, by having

him herd flocks in the desert for forty years to gain wilderness survival training. God patiently worked through historical processes to liberate the Hebrew nation from slavery.

Finally, purist ideologies justify coercive use of force to bring about their envisioned future, so that the end justifies the means. Both Adolf Hitler and Josef Stalin massacred millions as sacrifices to their ideologies. Purist ideologies are able to clearly name the enemies, and then they must neutralize, and preferably annihilate, these enemies.

At the center of Jesus' call to justice lies the command to love our enemies; for him, the means and the end are part of the same call. The cross was not just a one-day event that marked the conclusion of Jesus' pre-resurrection life on earth; the cross was also his WAY of life on earth so that he could say to his followers, take up your cross and follow me. Jesus did not preach purist ideology; he preached radical surrender, which acknowledges the limit of its knowledge, participates in historical process, and does not use coercive force based on ideology. With that context, we can ask again, "Why did he call twelve uneducated Jewish men to be his disciples?" To answer that question, we need to go to Thesis 3.

**Thesis #3: *Living inside the already and the not yet, we are called to seek proximate justice.***

Imagine that you are a horticulturalist and someone invites you to her orchard and says, "Here's a rare oriental apple tree, and it's healthy in these ways but sick in these ways. What advice can you give me to maximize its health and curb its sickness?" You carefully analyze the tree and come up with a list of suggestions to nurse this rare and precious tree back towards health.

Jesus' call to justice is very similar to that process. Christians believe that the blessing-rich hand of God is present in this world, and Christians believe that evil and injustice are also present. We call this paradox the already and the not yet. God's justice is present, but his full and complete justice/shalom is not yet present. And we are called to strengthen the presence of his justice.

Dr. Steven Garber, at the Washington Institute for Faith, Vocation and Culture in Washington, D.

C., has coined a phrase to name this phenomenon: we are called, says Garber, to embody "proximate justice."<sup>4</sup> Seeking proximate justice can be described as the wisest steps that we can take right now to further Jesus' call to justice in our historical context, steps that point to the coming of the shalom-ful kingdom of God, just as yeast functions in the dough and candles of light illuminate the darkness.

Proximate justice recognizes that perfection is not an option, and seeking the kingdom of God is not just an option but our deepest calling. Stephen Spielberg's movie *Lincoln*, just nominated for best picture of 2012 (and 11 other Oscars), gives us a rich picture of seeking proximate justice in action. The movie takes place in January 1865, when President Lincoln is convinced that his efforts to end slavery in the U. S. will fail unless an amendment to the constitution abolishing slavery is passed in Washington. He also believes that this amendment must be passed immediately, before the civil war is over. As the movie begins, he has about two weeks to get it done. He recognizes that timing is everything. As his project is deeply complicated by political, economic, and military realities, he has his backroom boys go behind the scenes and work out some hard-nosed deals with recalcitrant politicians in order to secure their votes. And the amendment passes.

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*The call to proximate justice occurs at the intersection of what Christian theology calls the already and the not yet.*

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The movie functions as a textbook case study for seeking proximate justice for these reasons: first, it recognizes that seeking justice proceeds one step at a time, and we are called to discern what the next step is and to seek that next step with all of our might. Timing is everything. Lincoln discerns that this particular step must be taken immediately, or a decisive moment in history would be lost forever. Second, it recognizes that because life is very messy and complicated, we must immerse ourselves inside

the complicated messes to further justice. When you're walking through a swamp, you're going to get mud on your clothes. Third, seeking proximate justice takes courageous risk-taking. Those around the president knew that the stakes were enormous, and yet he leads them with a calm and courageous sense of humor, especially when they are consumed by anxiety.

We can see that the search for proximate justice is present in Scripture. The New Testament appears to condone and even encourage slavery. Why doesn't it just condemn it outright and advocate for its abolishment? In an empire in which half the population was enslaved, Paul recognizes that his calling to embody justice as Jesus did could not include advocating for the abolishment of slavery. A band of tiny house churches scattered throughout a powerful empire would simply be massacred for advocating such a radical social change. So Paul takes two steps towards proximate justice instead: (1) he advocates for the humanization of slavery, calling for both masters and slaves to rise above the normal parameters of slavery and treat each other as Image-of-God human beings, (2) and in situations where it is appropriate, as in the master-slave relationship between Philemon and Onesimus, he challenges Philemon to set his runaway slave Onesimus free.

We can see examples of Jesus seeking proximate justice on every page of the four gospels. Jesus did not preach the radical overthrow of any social structures. In his interactions with the powerful and the powerless, the centurion and the widow, the healthy and the leper, the Jew, the Samaritan, the Gentile, men and women, adults and children, the pious, and the sinful, he embodied a new way. By embodying proximate justice, he pointed towards a new social structure that has come to be embodied in various ways in almost every country on earth.

So, back to our earlier question: why would Jesus invite twelve Jewish males, none of whom were slaves, to serve as his disciples? I believe that this invitation is a perfect illustration of seeking proximate justice. Why were all twelve Jewish? The barriers between Jews and Gentiles in Jesus' day were enormous. The first tiny cracks in this huge barrier did not emerge until Peter was called to preach to the Roman centurion Cornelius in

Acts chapter 10. This barrier was so huge that the first signs of prejudice in the early church occurred between Hebrew-speaking Jews in the church and Greek-speaking Jews in the church: you can read about this prejudice in Acts 6. 1. This is Jewish-Christian vs. Jewish-Christian prejudice! The historical setting in which Jesus ministered allowed no room for Gentile disciples. But Jesus did not simply accept this barrier. The gospels record several profoundly redemptive interactions between Jesus and Gentiles during his ministry, and each one of these embodies something of his call to radical justice.

Jesus' disciples were also all men. A common prayer of the Pharisees in Jesus' day went, "Blessed art thou, O God, for not making me a Gentile, a slave or a woman." If women had official functions in pagan religions, these functions frequently involved sexual activity of some sort. In first century Israel, women were not permitted to testify in court because their word was considered untrustworthy, and they were not permitted to learn alongside men because their intellects were considered inferior. The historical setting in which Jesus ministered allowed no room for female disciples. But Jesus did not simply accept this barrier. The gospels record dozens and dozens of profoundly redemptive interactions between Jesus and women, and we know that his traveling band included twenty-five people or more, and many of these, according to Luke 8, were women, some of whom were wealthy and funded his ministry. Jesus embodied the call to proximate justice in his relations with male and female.

Still, there were no slaves among Jesus' disciples. Because of their liberation from Egypt, the Jews rejected slavery, so there are very few references to slaves in the gospels. If Jesus had called a slave to leave his master and join his traveling band, that call would have constituted a crime punishable by death. However, Jesus himself embodied the posture of a slave, most clearly when he washed his disciples' feet, as recorded in John 13. And we know that there were many slaves in the early church. Jesus embodied the call to proximate justice in his interactions with those who were free and those who were slaves.

The call to proximate justice occurs at the intersection of what Christian theology calls the already

and the not yet. We are called to discern where the already is—where there is evidence of the kind of justice God calls us to present in our society. We are called to discern the not yet—the ways in which God’s justice is absent. And at that intersection, we are called to discern what the wisest next steps for us to pursue right now might be.

With that discernment in mind, one more comment about the twelve male, Jewish disciples needs to be made. The call to justice encompasses every single dimension of life, and there is another dimension of justice-seeking which led directly to Jesus’ death sentence, and that is this: first-century Jewish Sabbath practice. Jesus recognized that the Sabbath practices of his day had become tools of the religiously powerful to oppress others, so he rejected these practices. At several points in the gospels we read that, after an instance of Jesus pub-

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*If our culture perceives Christians to be arrogant, judgmental, self-righteous, and narrow-minded, might we not be called to go public with a repentant posture?*

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licly rejecting Sabbath practice, the religious leaders gathered to plot his death. Injustice comes in very many shapes and sizes, and, as Jesus embodied the search for proximate justice, he discerned that the first battle to fight did not involve gender or ethnicity or economic status but religious legalism, and, with our twenty-twenty hindsight, that fight makes total sense. And that specific search for proximate justice led directly to his crucifixion.

Christians who embody their faith as a purist ideology claim that pursuing proximate justice is a compromise, a sell-out, a giving in. Jesus shows us that this is not the case; his justice-seeking led directly to his crucifixion, and history reveals to us countless others who also embodied the search for proximate justice and were killed in the search.

In my view, the path of purist ideology is the cop-out. This path does not want to deal with the messi-

ness of history, and it does not want to admit the fallibility of our own knowledge. Instead, the community that seeks proximate justice embodies the rich serenity prayer composed by Reinhold Niebuhr: “Lord, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”

And that leads to my final thesis:

**Thesis #4: *Those who follow Jesus are called to be foundationally self-critical.***

At the beginning of this talk, I mentioned that the public perception of Christians is that we are arrogantly judgmental and self-righteous. But our calling is to embody precisely the opposite posture. Peter tells us in I Peter 4, “If you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name. For it is time for judgment to begin with the family of God.”

In other words, central to the posture of the Christian community is that it is a transparently self-critical, repentant community. We are a community of redeemed sinners. The first call to repentance that Christians ever issue is to themselves. Like any religion, Christianity has its historical heroes, persons whose lives embody the essence of the faith. In Hebrews 11, there is a long list of such persons, so that this chapter is often subtitled, “heroes of the faith.” But what is most striking about this list is the messiness of the lives listed there and the transparency of the record in describing this messiness!

In Scripture, we meet Cain, who murders his brother Abel; Noah, who gets drunk; Abraham, who lies about his marriage in order to protect himself; Jacob, who deceives his father; Moses, who murders an Egyptian; Gideon, who needs four miraculous signs in order to trust God’s call; Samson, who repeatedly gives in to temptations from seductive women; David, who commits adultery with his neighbor and then conveniently has her husband murdered when it turns out she’s pregnant; Elijah, who blames God for Jezebel’s death threats; and countless Psalmists, who struggle with their faith and blame God for hiding or sleeping on the job or playing favorites against them.

In the New Testament, we meet believers who

lie about their income on a property sale; we meet a church in Corinth that celebrates an incestuous relationship, has members who regularly get drunk at communion services, and set rather arbitrary standards to determine who is more spiritual and who is less spiritual; and we meet a church community in Galatia that creates a long list of rules that all must abide by in order to be considered acceptable, chief of which is that all males must be circumcised. All of these believers were called to repentance, but this call to repentance did not occur in a quiet backroom where they could confidentially deal with their mess ups and start over again. All of these are in the public record of Scripture for all the world to see.

So, how do we process these three realities: (1) Christians are called to be publicly honest about our need to be repentant; (2) there are voices in the mainstream media that delight in embarrassing Christianity; and (3) the Christian community has contributed to the world both great gifts of justice and plenty of material that needs to be criticized. How do we handle this combination?

Rev. John Ames, the fictional narrator in Marilynne Robinson's novel *Gilead*, reflects on Jesus' command to love your enemies:

If you confront insult or antagonism, your first impulse will be to respond in kind. But if you think, as it were, This is an emissary sent from the Lord, and somehow benefit is intended for me, first of all the occasion to demonstrate my faithfulness, the chance to show that I do in some small degree participate in the grace that saved me, you are free to act otherwise than as circumstances would seem to dictate...You are freed of the impulse to hate or resent that person.<sup>5</sup>

Ames posits a foundation for responding to criticism, which drives the follower of Jesus to her knees to pray, "Lord, if there is a grain of truth in this criticism that I need to learn from, show me what it is and help me to repent being grateful for the naming of my sin."

I believe that such an approach is needed today. If our culture perceives Christians to be arrogant, judgmental, self-righteous, and narrow-minded, might we not be called to go public with a repentant posture? Pastor John Dickerson of the Cornerstone

Church in Prescott, Arizona, reflects on this question in a piece published in the *New York Times* one month ago. He writes,

We (Christians) must adapt the way we hold our beliefs—with grace and humility instead of superiority or hostility...Instead of offering hope, many evangelicals have claimed the role of moral gatekeeper, judge and jury. Some evangelical leaders are embarrassed by our movement's present paralysis. I am not. Weakness is a potent purifier.<sup>6</sup>

I agree with Pastor Dickerson. The contradictions from three centuries ago, expressed in the movie *The Mission*, are still with us today. We who are Christians need to publicly acknowledge our sins and recommit to seeking the kingdom through steps of proximate justice as Jesus did.

What might a Christian community look like whose most public justice-seeking characteristics were grace and humility? This community would embody James 1:19: "Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry." It seems quite clear that our 21<sup>st</sup> century is a very troubled time, a time when we who are Christians are, first of all, called to be repentantly respectful listeners. Such listening involves hearing the groans of those suffering from injustice and hurt, it means paying careful and intellectually discerning attention to the best scientific research and theories, it means absorbing the various angers that come our way without our being reactive and defensive, it means acknowledging those critiques of our shortcomings that have elements of truth in them, and it means focusing on what unites us as Christians from differing denominations and as Christians and non-Christians who both desire a more just world.

Steven Garber suggests that the Christian community that seeks proximate justice goes through four steps. First, as it listens, it weeps for the brokenness and injustice present in our world. Second, it lifts its broken heart up to the Lord in prayer. Third, it studies, analyzes, discerns in the strongest ways possible all that it can about this brokenness and injustice. And finally, it acts, seeking proximate justice. But, says Garber, once you get to step four, all four of these acts continue simultaneously: weeping, praying, studying, acting.<sup>7</sup>

In other words, the struggles of our times provide us with limitless opportunities to focus on what really matters.

Here are two brief illustrations to end. About twenty years ago, a young man pulled me aside at a social gathering and said, "I'm gay and I'm really struggling. People who know tend to judge me and treat me as if I'm just seeking attention. They don't realize that I'd much rather not be gay, that I'd much rather just get married to a woman, raise kids, go to work and lead a normal life. They think I've got a chip on my shoulder and am out to prove something. I wish they could just see me as I am, a person struggling with his sexual orientation." After hearing his *cri de Coeur*, I realized that my first calling was simply to weep with him. What might things look like if the first response that we Christians had with those who experience same-sex attraction was to weep with them?

Second, during the past few weeks, the news in Canada has been filled with issues related to justice for our aboriginal peoples, and a newer movement called "Idle no more" has been receiving a lot of attention. Historically, Christians in Canada have both been a blessing and participated in committing horrendous abuses against aboriginal peoples. Twenty years ago, Anglican Archbishop Michael Peers issued a lengthy apology to the National Native Convocation Minaki in Ontario, concerning his church's role in the residential school system, a public apology that was also publicly accepted. It's becoming clear that these issues will be on our national front burner throughout 2013. I have no idea what proximate justice for the aboriginal community looks like, but I know that I have no choice but to seek it.

In his profoundly wise book *Reaching for the invisible God*, Philip Yancey writes, "I used to believe that Christianity solved problems and made life easier. Increasingly, I believe that my faith complicates life, in ways it should be complicated. As a Christian, I cannot not care about the environment, about homelessness, about poverty, about racism and religious persecution, about injustice and vio-

lence. God does not give me that option... . Jesus offers a peace that involves new turmoil, a rest that involves new tasks. The 'peace of God that passes all understanding' promised in the New Testament is a peace in the midst of warfare, a calmness in the midst of fear, a confidence in the midst of doubt."<sup>8</sup>

Yancey's words capture the visceral experience of a community that seeks proximate justice, being inspired by the description of the suffering servant in Isaiah 42:1-3, where we read, "Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight. I will put my Spirit on him, and he will bring justice to the nations. He will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out. In faithfulness he will bring forth justice; he will not falter or be discouraged until he establishes justice on earth." That's still the Christian call, to follow that servant.

#### Endnotes

1. Gary H. Tobin and Aryeh K. Weinberg, *Profiles of the American University, Volume II: Religious Beliefs and Behavior of College Faculty* ( San Francisco: Institute for Jewish and Community Research, 2007).
2. James Penner et al, *Hemorrhaging Faith, Why and When Canadian Young Adults are leaving, staying and returning to church* ( Richmond Hill, ON: Evangelical Fellowship of Canada, 2012).
3. John Ortbert, "Grace and Jesus." Speech given at the Arentis Conference of the Institute for Christian Spiritual Formation (Wichita, Kansas, Sept. 18, 2012).
4. Garber described this in an address titled "Is it possible to know the world and still love the world?" Redeemer University College (Ancaster, ON, Jan. 12, 2011).
5. Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004), 124.
6. John Dickerson, "The Decline of Evangelical America," *New York Times*, December 15, 2012.
7. Garber, "Is it possible to know the world and still love the world?"
8. Philip Yancey, *Reaching for the Invisible God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 93-4.