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Christian Justice: A Review of Becoming a Just Church

Abstract

"For anyone who belongs to a local congregation, this book will challenge you to reflect on your church's approach and orientation to the community and to justice."

Posting about the book *Becoming a Just Church* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/christian-justice-a-review-of-becoming-a-just-church/>

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Comments

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July 18, 2019

Christian Justice: A Review of *Becoming a Just Church*

Abby Foreman

Title: *Becoming a Just Church: Cultivating Communities of God's Shalom*

Author: Adam L. Gustine

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In a recent article and newly released book, writer and photographer Chris Arnade shares his journey through what he calls “Back Row America.” Arnade, a former Wall Street bond trader, became disillusioned and left that life behind, seeking out ways to understand how those not on the fast track to elite universities, professions, and insulated, “successful” communities live. He did this, quite literally at first, by walking into the rundown neighborhoods that he had previously avoided. He began in New York City before trekking across the United States to understand the people and communities that have been left behind, or were never included, in the march towards economic growth and continued improvement. Arnade, a confident atheist at the beginning of his journey, discovered his faith along the way:

I kept finding myself in churches, as I kept finding myself in McDonald's, going there for one reason: because the people I wanted to learn from spent their time there. Often the only places open, welcoming and busy in back row neighborhoods were churches or McDonald's... For many back row Americans, the only places that regularly treat them like humans are churches. The churches are everywhere, small churches that have come in and taken over a space and light it up on Sundays and Wednesdays. They walk inside

the church, and immediately they meet people who get them. The preachers and congregants inside may preach to them, even judge their past decisions, but they don't look down on them...The churches understand the streets, understand everyone is a sinner and everyone fails (*Back Row America*).

The church is where the people are; the church welcomes people and is active in the community. After reading *Becoming a Just Church*, I think this captures the vision of Adam Gustine's vision of the church—of a people—hospitable in posture and worship, working towards a shared vision of **shalom** in their community. The author, Adam Gustine, puts forth a compelling vision of a just church in his book *Becoming a Just Church: Cultivating Communities of God*. Gustine uses his own faith and justice journey to illustrate the importance of the call and posture of the church towards justice.

In the rain-soaked Midwest where flood waters have yet to recede, it is easy to relate to Gustine's vision of what he calls the low ground church. Gustine challenges churches to occupy the low ground, not the high ground. The high ground signifies safety and insulation from problems and vulnerability. The low ground is in close proximity to vulnerability and the literal and figurative flood waters that people and communities face. Just as Jesus oriented his life on earth towards the vulnerable, the common, and the outcast, so too should we. The church, in Gustine's view, should occupy physical and social space in low ground areas. Gustine poignantly asks, "Did Jesus come to the movers and the shakers, or did he come to the moved and the shaken?" (Gustine 111).

A local church is place specific, which should be shaped by and responsive to its physical community. Like the exiles in the time of Jeremiah, the people should collectively seek the peace and prosperity of the city (91-93). The people of God are called to be "gardeners of shalom." The work of gardeners "is to *cultivate* an ecosystem that promotes the flourishing of each individual plant" (91) This analogy of the garden is easy to apply to a neighborhood or community, and activities that promote economic and community development are important ways to tend and cultivate flourishing:

Because it is the work of cultivating a healthy neighborhood system—where individuals, families, and even the place itself can flourish as God intends—it helps us shoulder the burden of a broken world in need of restoration and renewal. We are a people who tend to what God's given us to tend, trusting that God will bring about the fruit of wholeness, flourishing and transformation as we faithfully cultivate toward those ends (92).

The church should not view its work as only salvific or spiritual but should also be active in bringing about redemption in all areas of life—in the already and not yet. It's in this call to be active participants in reconciliation, in the here and now, where some might get a little squirmy; what Gustine calls for is a church active in issues of justice within the

community. This requires taking sides. It is necessarily political—not necessarily partisan, but necessarily political. Like many of his Christian contemporaries, he does not see a way forward for Christians in aligning with the right or the left, and articulates a wariness towards partisan ideology, consumerism, and individualism. All of which he sees as having pervaded and corrupted the church's witness and work (198). I recognize this wariness in myself and I see it as common among many committed Christians who care deeply about their faith and also care deeply about justice for all those who bear the image of God.

Social and political power in society and within and among people must be acknowledged. When broken systems and people deny empowerment and dignity to people, Christians should lament and confess of this sin. Racial, social and economic inequality that is clearly visible within the world should not be reflected within the church, for those with privilege it is imperative that they are intentional about sharing power and approaching the shared work in the church with humility (185). The Christian practices of lament and confession of sin should not be lost or avoided. Gustine urges the reader to remember that a comfortable life is not promised to Christ followers: "Injustice is tangible evidence of the kingdom of darkness at work in the world (p. 50)...and it is evidence of the cosmic battle of the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the enemy, then we are free—required even—to stand against the devil's schemes. It's not partisan arguing, it's resisting and rejecting the powers and principalities" (51).

Gustine critiques the evangelical church for focusing on the Great Commission at the expense of the Great Commandments to love God and neighbor. He argues that the work of justice should not be considered a menu option; seeking justice is not optional for Christ followers who believe that they are invited to participate in redemption and reconciliation. Justice is not an outreach strategy; it is central to the work of the church. Gustine also provides critique of other contemporary trends in evangelical churches such as the prosperity gospel and the conflation of American nationalism with the Christian religion (46). He points out that church marketing and growth strategies are not only consumeristic, but they also can remove people from each other generationally and from the local community.

The book is organized into three parts and will be of interest to church laypersons and particularly to formal and informal church leaders. The chapters include discussion questions, and this book could be used in church small groups or as part of a church visioning process. In the first part, Gustine lays out an *An Ecclesiology for Justice*. He emphasizes the importance of cultivating a church that has a faithful presence in character and posture (22). In the same way that Christians should carry the aroma of Christ, the church should be a place where we are captivated and capture by imagination in which we can envision shalom (39) and our place in the gospel narrative.

The second part drills deeper into what this looks like in congregational life, much of which has been discussed earlier in this review. Much in this section will be great discussion fodder for any small group or team reading through this book together. Gustine shares successes and failures from his own experiences to illustrate what this might look like, but he rightfully stops short of being overly prescriptive in what this exactly will look like for a church. For each, there will be a uniqueness that will be due to location, the Spirit's leading, and God's intention for that local church congregation. Gustine stresses that becoming a just church is a continual process in becoming "a people" of justice. It's clear, though, that his vision for the church is one that is local, oriented to place, committed to working for flourishing in that space. In the final section, Gustine includes a chapter on power within the church and society and returns to the analogy of the church being gardeners of shalom.

As someone who is well-situated in a Kuyperian world and life view, I have questions as to whether the role of the church as put forth by Gustine is too expansive. Perhaps instead of the church, we should focus on civil society and our nonprofit ministries as the vehicles to advocate for justice? Even as I pose this question, though, I suspect that Gustine would answer that assigning justice work to removed ministries and organizations is a bit of a cop out. And his sections on the posture of the local church convinces me that he's probably right. For anyone who belongs to a local congregation, this book will challenge you to reflect on your church's approach and orientation to the community and to justice.

As Christians, we are all called to create, to cultivate, to live a life so joyful and appealing that people are captured by the vision and imagination of God's perfect and good will for His people and His creation:

Yet without churches who are increasingly cultivating God's shalom in their midst, these impulses [to create and cultivate] and resonances with the things of God go untranslated for the wider world desperate for respite from the onslaught of ugliness and injustice that we see and experience day-to-day... I believe it is the responsibility of every church, irrespective of context and social location, to weave the pursuit of God's shalom as a *way of life* into the cultural fabric of the congregation. Without it, we are not fully the church (195).

The church should occupy the low ground, it should be welcoming to Arnade's back row, it is the place where all people should be able to come to be captivated and astonished by God's love for His people and His creation.