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Editor's Note: Dr. Vanden Bout presented this paper at the Prodigal Love of God Conference (celebrating the 400th anniversary of the Synod at Dortrecht and Canons of Dort), April 2019, sponsored by Dordt University and co-sponsored by the Lilly Fellowship Program.

American Prodigal: White Church, Black Church, and the Feast of Social Justice



by Melissa Vanden Bout

“Sometimes I look at the Bible and think all God is about is justice.”
-John Perkins¹

When I say that there is a feast of social justice, I do not mean that I have set the table. I mean that I am reporting back the news of a feast to others whose systems have been wracked with hunger pains for something nourishing. I did not make the feast; I am simply calling people to a table which was set a long time ago and has been continually replenished, since.²

Dr. Melissa Rovig Vanden Bout is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Trinity Christian College. Her work examines various ethical and bioethical concerns from the vantage of Thomist metaphysics and Reformed philosophy, encompassing such topics as human development, diversity as a normative aspect of reality, and relationships as constitutive of human identity

Our vision of the good orients our lives and guides our actions. Thus, a religious conception of the good that excludes what is often called “social” justice will have a very different impact than a religious vision that includes social justice.³ Though the term was originally coined to describe a religious idea, it is currently regarded by many American Christians with deep distrust, an aversion particularly notable within majority White groups. For example, prominent pastor, author, and seminary president John MacArthur recently issued a confessional statement describing social justice as the chief evil among “an onslaught of dangerous and false teachings.”⁴ By contrast, social justice has long been a core aspect of the witness and work of Black church traditions, institutions, and leaders. William Barber, pastor and successor to Martin Luther King’s leadership in a revived Poor People’s Campaign, and Traci Blackmon, pastor and Executive Minister of Justice and Local Ministries for The United Church of Christ, demonstrate with their teaching and community organizer activities the central role social justice plays in their vision of the good. This paper offers a historically rooted analysis of these different visions, and argues that the Black church tradition in America ought to be regarded as an elder brother feasting on the inherited wealth of a rich theological and practical tradition of social justice. White church traditions impoverished in this regard would do well to relinquish their prodigal’s scraps and return home.

Catholic social teaching offers a third possibility, and in some American contexts (or more

often, in other countries) the social and religious import of a vision of the good framed by Catholic social teaching bears strong resemblance to the vision of the good offered by many historically Black Christian institutions in America. I will not try to do justice to Catholic social teaching here, to its role in American discourse, or attempt to examine the overlap between it and the vision of the good offered by Black churches. Instead, we will focus on Protestant contexts, as this is the largest segment of American religious demographics,⁵ noting broad differences with regard to views on social justice, and will do so as a means to identify and analyze differing visions of the good and the way these manifest a divergence between primarily White Christian institutions and those Christian institutions which are historically Black.⁶

But what do we mean by social justice? Given that the context for this paper is a celebration of the Canons of Dort, I advert to the text of a report written by a Christian Reformed Church task force convened to address the problem of world hunger, particularly in the face of a terrible famine in eastern African countries. Not content to issue a report outlining the problem and the church's response, the task force issued another report, an analysis of systemic sin and associated Scriptural support. In the words of this church task force,

When we talk about social justice, we mean God's original intention for human society: a world where basic needs are met, people flourish, and peace (shalom) reigns. God calls us, the church, to participate in the renewal of society so that all—especially the weak and vulnerable—can enjoy God's good gifts. To do this, the church rightly emphasizes the administration of mercy. But this also involves identifying the root causes of what keeps people poor, hungry, and powerless. The vast web of structural factors that perpetuates these social injustices cannot be overcome without broad systemic reform, and so we witness and work to remove these barriers. If we avoid the issue of structural change, Christians would consign themselves to fighting the symptoms of poverty and hunger instead of getting at the disease itself. While the church is unable to provide relief to the hungry masses of the world, it can certainly advocate for systemic reforms that would significantly improve the lot

of millions in poverty. Moreover, if the church would avoid calling for changes to unjust structures, then it would be guilty of proclaiming a truncated gospel.⁷

In this report, members called the church to proclaim our "radical liberation through Jesus Christ from every configuration of sin."⁸ We should note these themes: social justice is about social good and social goods, it is oriented toward needs and aimed at full human flourishing, it addresses not only the person in need but the system which creates the need, and it does so out of love for neighbor because the gospel is a radical liberation.

With that picture in mind, a vision of good that extends to the full scope of God's concern and to an inclusive understanding of my neighbor's flourishing, let us consider two contrasting positions with regard to social justice. One of these positions, offered by a coalition of predominantly White and Protestant leaders led by author, pastor, radio personality, and seminary president John MacArthur, might be taken as emblematic of white Christian aversion to social justice. The other position, seen in the core documents of a renewed Poor People's Campaign and in the work of the movement's leader, pastor and activist Rev. Dr. William Barber, is illustrative of the Black church's long commitment to social justice.

Last year, over a period of several weeks,⁹ MacArthur published several blog posts outlining his claim that social justice is antithetical to the gospel. In one, after describing his own involvement in the Civil Rights Movement, some details of which are contested by one of the leaders he invokes,¹⁰ MacArthur posits current social justice commitments in opposition to that work, describing social justice as "the language of law, not gospel—and worse, it mirrors the jargon of worldly politics, not the message of Christ." Social justice is, in his judgment, "the most subtle and dangerous threat so far" to the gospel of all that he has faced in his decades of service.¹¹ MacArthur sets social justice against biblical justice, ascribing the former to recent and faddish adoption of work by "secularist" academics, styling social justice as a worldly attack on the church, and resistance to social justice as a matter of preserving the gospel. He questions the necessity of social justice, writing that "four years

ago, I would not have thought it possible for Bible-believing evangelicals to be divided over the issue of racism” and describing present problems as an overreaction. In his words, “I don’t know of any authentically evangelical church where people would be excluded or even disrespected because of their ethnicity or skin color.”¹² Those who still see racism as a present and pressing concern are thus failing to be gospel centered and reconciled: those who advocate for social justice are admonished to remember that “love keeps no record of wrongs.”¹³

MacArthur’s perspective is not an anomaly. One has only to spend a little time in a predominantly white Christian space to hear the same deep aversion to treating social justice as proper to or even compatible with Christianity. A few months after MacArthur’s blog posts appeared, his online platform launched a document, the Statement on Social Justice and the Gospel, which includes a framing section as well as a series of affirmations and denials.¹⁴ Initially signers were overwhelmingly white and exclusively male, pastors and directors of ministries and other Christian institutions. Since then, more than 11,000 individuals have added their names. This document positions social justice among “questionable sociological, psychological, and political theories . . . making inroads into Christ’s church,” a “deadly idea” and a “threat” to the gospel. The Statement affirms that “implications and applications of the gospel, such as the obligation to live justly in the world, though legitimate and important in their own right, are not definitional components of the gospel.” Several sections actively discourage association between racism and White identity¹⁵ and carve out room to protect those wrongs which MacArthur believes have no connection to Scripture.¹⁶ This might, for instance, enshrine a right to discriminate against LGBTQ people, which we can see in the claim that “gay Christian” is an identity that is biblically illegitimate, and in the admonition that to conceive of people as “sexual minorities” dishonors the “image-bearing character of human sexuality as created by God.” For the record, transgender, asexual, and

intersex people exist, and they make manifest the image of God.¹⁷

The Statement also attempts to preempt scholarship, religious and otherwise, on the nature and history of racism. It denies that racism is a function of power, and that there is any substantial link between it and the “core principles” of historic evangelicalism, or that evangelicalism today “has any deliberate agenda to elevate one ethnic group and subjugate another.” Another section denies the possibility that restricting women’s vocation to respect and submission to men could be disparaging to us. The closing sentences gathers these various threads, stating that “we emphatically deny that lectures on social issues (or activism aimed at reshaping the wider culture) are as vital to the life and health of the church as the preaching of the gospel and the exposition of Scripture . . . [, for] such things tend to become distractions that inevitably lead to departures from the gospel.”

From this widely circulated document, we get a sense of which particular kinds of justice concerns might be excluded by those who view social justice as a threat to their faith. What then shall we say about the scope of this Christian vision of the good? What does it encompass? MacArthur’s proclamation helps us with this, too: “We affirm that the primary role of the church is to worship God through the preaching of his word, teaching sound doctrine, observing baptism and the Lord’s Supper, refuting those who contradict, and evangelizing the lost.” Enactment of this vision may be expected to “mollify” social evils, but signers forswear efforts to change laws as not “possessing any inherent power to change sinful hearts.” In sum, the vision of the good offered by predominantly white Christian leaders, exemplified in this statement by MacArthur and embedded in countless sermons, books, and conversations, is one restricted to the realm of preaching, sacrament, and evangelizing. It expressly restricts itself from social and structural change aimed at redress for structural sin, by way of denying the existence, scope, and power of those ills.

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John Perkins put this better, when he wrote that

in many ways, black theology and white theology in churches have been like two sides of a coin when it comes to thinking about justice and redemption. To put it in very general terms, white theology (especially white evangelical theology) has tended to focus on the personal side of redemption. Emphasis has been placed on evangelism, salvation, and individual spiritual growth and holiness—with the Bible being regarded as a devotional book that inspires believers individually.¹⁸

While White slave owners and the White preachers who refused to denounce the institution of slavery were teaching enslaved people a redacted gospel, heavy on obedience and a salvation devoid of liberation, enslaved people taught each other that God was the one who set captives free and brought His people out of slavery in Egypt.¹⁹ While Black clergy led members of their congregation in demonstrations against segregation, White clergy published “An Appeal for Law and Order and Common Sense” in newspapers across Alabama, urging obedience to the law. During the “Unite the Right” event in Charlottesville in August of 2017, Rev. Blackmon preached the gospel to fellow anti-racism demonstrators in a church surrounded by violent white supremacists carrying torches and shouting Nazi slogans. A few days later, Jerry Falwell, president of Liberty University and a powerful national voice for American evangelicalism, defended the president’s pronouncement that in a clash between Nazis and anti-racists there were “very fine people on both sides.”²⁰ One of the 24 members of President Trump’s Evangelical Advisory Board resigned in protest; most simply stayed silent.²¹

If White, Protestant Christianity has an impoverished vision of social justice today, it is at least in part because of White Christians’ attempts to protect white supremacy in all of its historical iterations. Jonathan Wilson Hartgrove argues that

However we understand the saving work of Jesus’ death and resurrection, the way of the cross that Jesus walked here on earth is a form of political engagement. Racial blindness has kept generations of white Christians in America

from noting this basic feature of a story we’ve prized and memorized. But enslaved Christians couldn’t miss the good news of a distinctive way toward freedom in Jesus’ cross. Black social Christianity has always noted the political call of the gospel.²²

Efforts to accommodate white supremacy in all its historical iterations have steadily chipped away at the broader American church’s ability to live out the fullness of its vocation.²³

In striking contrast to a racialized antipathy to social justice, Rev. William Barber, who with Rev. Dr. Liz Theoharis, director of the Kairos Center, leads a renewed Poor People’s Campaign, outlines a crippling lack of moral vision in our country. What is needed, Barber argues, is the full reconstruction, promised but never realized after the Civil War, a “Third Reconstruction.” In his final Sunday sermon, Dr. King told his hearers, “We are coming to Washington in a poor people’s campaign. Yes, we are going to bring the tired, the poor, the huddled masses We are coming to demand that the government address itself to the problem of poverty.”²⁴ Four days later, an assassin’s bullet felled him. The Kairos Center, in its concept paper describing a new Poor people’s campaign, puts it this way:

King knew that dividing the poor by creating different levels of oppression based on race and gender is critical to maintaining the power of the most privileged. He also understood, as we must, that you cannot fight poverty without fighting the social ills that cause or deepen it, the same social ills that threaten and damage the security and well-being of people everywhere.²⁵

The modern iteration of the Poor People’s Campaign, building on the work King and his contemporaries started, invokes a moral revival based on “our deepest religious and constitutional values that demand justice for all.”²⁶ Their “Moral Agenda” identifies and sets itself against systemic racism, poverty and inequality, ecological devastation, war economy and militarism, and under such headings, examining such needs and concerns as racist voter suppression laws, our broken immigration system, and minimum wage laws.²⁷ At each point, this agenda details an injustice and names the varied effects that injustice has on distinct pop-

ulations. For instance, the section on voting rights specifically adverts to the current exclusion of the formerly incarcerated, naming a specific wrong and invoking a specific good. Finally, the Campaign addresses itself to the way that Americans have used religious and moral justifications in the past and in the present, identifying this pattern as a national crisis of moral narrative, concluding that

a morality that claims to care for the souls of people while destroying their bodies and communities is deeply immoral. We have the right to ground our public policies and budget allocations in a moral narrative that prioritizes and follows our deepest religious and Constitutional moral commitments to justice.²⁸

In response to this call, I suggest that if, like me, white Christianity finds itself a prodigal in a far-away land, eating scraps not fit for pigs, it might stop and notice that the vision of the good which should sustain it is too shriveled to offer much nourishment. The Black church is in this regard an elder brother and dines on a banquet that spans both theology and praxis. The White church would do well to return to an understanding of the good news as including social justice, sit next to our brother, and ask him to pass the potatoes so we can share in the feast.

Finally, some things to consider with regard to what “the prodigal love of God” means, in terms of our Christian vision of the good and an understanding of social justice. What shall we say about this generous, reckless love, which this conference and the Canons of Dort invite us to consider? We might begin by noting that this prodigal love of God is not colorblind. God does not identify with the position of privilege but engages us through the perspective and from the position of oppression and exclusion. As Rev. Traci Blackmon said,

an Afrocentric Palestinian who was born on the wrong side of the tracks challenging the empire of his day and challenging the religious voices of his day, ... I don't see how you serve that Jesus and [think] the gospel [is not] social The scriptures tell us to care for the least of these. So

I can only assume that we, even clergy, have in some cases become so comfortable in our privilege and our narratives that mingle the gospel with messages of nationalism, messages of capitalism and messages of white supremacy.²⁹

When we speak today in the words of the Canons of Dort to say that this love is “to all persons promiscuously and without distinction” (Pt. 2, Article V), that does not mean God’s love comes to us outside of the context in which we actually exist. We might be tempted to hear that excerpt as an

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ahistorical pronouncement to disembodied selves. But the gospel does not normalize or sacralize the perspective of the powerful: that *of course* God’s love and preference is for them. That is not the shocking good news of

the Kingdom of God; rulers do not tend to assume that they are beneath the notice of Power, the rich are not prone to thinking of themselves as negligible, and the comfortable are not used to thinking of their wellbeing as peripheral. Rather, this statement from the Canons, if it is to be thoroughly biblical, must mean that God is not merely baptizing the status quo. That would not be good news. It would not be good, and it would not be news. If we want to understand what it means that God loves all of us, each one of us, without distinction, we must set it inside of the message of the gospel and of the whole trajectory of the story of redemption. The good news—both good and news—is that God has identified God’s self with the poor, the marginalized, the powerless. The Good News of God’s prodigal love is not that God is blind. God does not agree with us that maleness and whiteness and ableness and cisgenderness and heterosexuality are the neutral setting on humanity and that it is through that door, by that measure, that we are all accepted and invited into shalom. God does not start with our assumptions about who deserves love, praise God.

A vision of the good that restricts itself from social justice, treats social justice as an extraneous good, or regards it as antithetical to the gospel cannot recognize the full scope of redemption. If only

spiritual good (prayer, sacrament, preaching, evangelizing, etc.) is within God's purview, our God is too small.³⁰ We who stand in the Reformed tradition must remember our commitment to our boldly inclusive view of God's sovereignty. If our Christian vision of the good excludes the concerns of the marginalized, it necessarily sacralizes white supremacy, misogyny, and every other kind of structural sin that besets us. Such a narrow field of metaphysical value includes the priorities and concerns of some but not others; it is not neutral. It is not even what it first might appear to be: a sort of dualism in which the spiritual aspect of all humans is valued over the physical. A Christianity that excludes social justice inescapably ratifies and entrenches social injustice within theology and praxis.

The vision of the good that we are called to as people of God is expansive, as expansive as the reign of the God we worship. It includes our connections, allegiances, and identities. The gospel comes to us as we are, to the world as it is, but it leaves neither us nor our world unchanged. I leave you with this word from Rev. Blackmon: "There is no existential distance between 'social justice' and discipleship. If you don't know this, it is likely you are doing neither."³¹

Endnotes

1. John M. Perkins, *Dream with Me: Race, Love, and the Struggle We Must Win* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2017), 103.
2. This small work can only point to that of others which has nourished me. See, for example, James Cone's *Black Theology and Black Power* (New York: Seabury Press, 1969), *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2011), and *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997); Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven: Yale, 2010); Traci West, *Disruptive Christian Ethics: When Racism and Women's Lives Matter* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2006); Andrew Billingsley, *Mighty Like a River: The Black Church and Social Reform* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Forrest E. Harris, Sr., *Ministry for Social Crisis Theology and Praxis in the Black Church Tradition* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1993); Rosetta E. Ross, *Witnessing & Testifying: Black Women,*

Religion, and Civil Rights (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003); Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (New York: Abingdon Cokesbury Press, 1949).

3. I leave to others the investigation of the precise parameters and evolution of social justice as a term. See, for example, David Miller, *Principles of Social Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001); Carlos Andrés Pérez Garzón, "Unveiling the Meaning of Social Justice in Colombia," *Mexican Law Review* 1 (20): 27–66 <https://revistas.juridicas.unam.mx/index.php/mexican-law-review/article/view/11892/13684>; Leo W. Shields, "The History and Meaning of the Term Social Justice" (PhD diss. University of Notre Dame, 1941. Garzon uses Shield's approach, that social justice has now become the term we use to describe the justice which "required that all parts of the society, because of their interdependence, guided their actions with the aim of achieving the common good, not only the good of the industrialists, for example." For a focus on social justice and Christianity, see Charles Marsh, *The Beloved Community: How Faith Shapes Social Justice, From the Civil Rights Movement to Today* (New York: Basic Books, 2005); Mary Anne Poe, "Fairness Is Not enough: Social Justice as Restoration of Right Relationships," *Social Work & Christianity* 34, no. 4 (2007):449-470.
4. "The Statement of Social Justice and the Gospel," <https://statementonsocialjustice.com/>.
5. According to Pew Research figures, nearly 47% of Americans are Evangelical Protestants, main-line Protestants, or historically black Protestants. Evangelical Protestants, at 25%, are the single largest group in terms of religious identity; 76% of Evangelical Protestants identify as white. "Religious Landscape Study," Pew Research, accessed March 25, 2019. <https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/>.
6. A brief word as to this divergence between primarily White and historically Black churches on the matter of social justice: this is a general pattern with a number of exceptions. However, I am not at all interested in prioritizing exceptions, choosing instead to help us recognize the contours of two coherent, historically shaped visions of the good. For treatment of exceptions to the broad White, Evangelical views on social justice, see Brantley W. Gasaway, *Progressive Evangelicals and the Pursuit of Social Justice* (Chapel Hill:

University of North Carolina Press, 2014). Jim Wallis' work in *Sojourners Magazine* also stands as an exception to White Protestant aversion to social justice.

7. "For My Neighbor's Good," *Christian Reformed Church in North America, Synod 1979*, p. 41. For more context, see <http://justice.crcna.org/global-poverty-and-hunger-church-speaks>.
8. *Ibid.*
9. "The Injustice of Social Justice," September 7, 2018, <https://www.gty.org/library/blog/B180907/the-injustice-of-social-justice>.
10. "A Civil Rights Leader Is Accusing John MacArthur of 'Lying' About Where He Was When MLK Died," *Relevant Magazine*, February 4, 2019, <https://relevantmagazine.com/current/nation/a-civil-rights-leader-is-accusing-john-macarthur-of-lying-about-where-he-was-when-mlk-died/>.
11. "Social Injustice and the Gospel," August 13, 2018, <https://www.gty.org/library/blog/B180813/social-injustice-and-the-gospel>.
12. "Is the Controversy over 'Social Justice' Really Necessary?" August 27, 2018, <https://www.gty.org/library/blog/B180827>.
13. "The Injustice of Social Justice," September 7, 2018, <https://www.gty.org/library/blog/B180907>. Here MacArthur quotes 1 Corinthians 13:5.
14. "The Statement of Social Justice and the Gospel," <https://statementonsocialjustice.com/>.
15. "We further deny that one's ethnicity establishes any necessary connection to any particular sin." *Ibid.*
16. We deny...that Christians can live justly in the world under any principles other than the biblical standard of righteousness." *Ibid.*
17. Denying the existence of minorities does, however, serve to facilitate persecution against them. Denying the existence of transgender people has the effect of obscuring the shockingly high level of violence directed at them, especially transgender women of color. The American Medical Association recently issued a press release highlighting its concerns and delineating policy changes in response to such violence. See "AMA adopts new policies on first day of voting at 2019 Annual Meeting," *American Medical Association*, June 10, 2019, <https://www.ama-assn.org/press-center/press-releases/ama-adopts-new-policies-first-day-voting-2019-annual-meeting>. Another example of this pattern is that of Myanmar authorities denying the existence of Rohingya as a people group, the better to deny that they are targeting them for genocide and genocide-like persecution. See Hannah Beech, "No such thing as Rohingya: Myanmar erases a history." *New York Times*, December 2, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/02/world/asia/myanmar-rohingya-denial-history.html>. Experts and leading human rights organizations document abuses and atrocities and recommend that those responsible face appropriate charges. See, for example, the report by <https://www.ushmm.org/information/press/press-releases/museum-finds-compelling-evidence-genocide-was-committed-against-rohingya-wa>.
18. *Dream with Me*, 103-104.
19. See Jemar Tisby, *The Color of Compromise* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2019), 19-20, 25-26, 35-39, 45.
20. Falwell's defense of Trump's infamous pronunciation occurred in the context of an ABC interview. Nikki Zink, "Trump has 'inside information' on who protested in Charlottesville, says Falwell Jr. in president's defense," August 20, 2017, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/trump-inside-information-protested-charlottesville-falwell-jr-defense/story?id=49313453>.
21. Tom Gjelten, "Trump's Evangelical Advisers Stand By Their Man," Last updated August 19, 2017, <https://www.npr.org/2017/08/18/544531424/trumps-evangelical-advisers-stand-by-their-man>.
22. *Reconstructing the Gospel: Finding Freedom from Slaveholder Religion*, (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2018), 132.
23. Tisby makes this argument in *The Color of Compromise*, and posits that because American racism was constructed, it can be deconstructed: "Christians deliberately chose complicity with racism in the past, but the choice to confront racism remains a possibility today" (19).
24. Wolfgang Mieder, *Making a Way Out of No Way: Martin Luther King's Sermonic Proverbial Rhetoric* (New York: Peter Lang, 2010), 394.
25. "Building a Poor People's Campaign for Today," *Poor People's Campaign*, accessed March 27, 2019, <https://kairoscenter.org/poor-peoples-campaign-concept-paper/>.

26. "Fundamental Principles," Poor People's Campaign, accessed March 27, 2019, <https://www.poorpeoplescampaign.org/fundamental-principles/>.
27. "A Moral Agenda Based on Fundamental Rights," Poor People's Campaign, accessed March 27, 2019, <https://www.poorpeoplescampaign.org/demands/>.
28. Ibid.
29. Elizabeth Adetiba, "The Reverend Who Preached Against Hate While Nazis Marched on Her," In These Times, Sept. 8, 2017, <http://inthesetimes.com/article/20501/reverend-traci-blackmon-preached-in-charlottesville-while-nazis-marched>.
30. We should note that even these spiritual goods are also embodied and contextualized.
31. Traci Blackmon, Facebook, February 27, 2019.