

# Voices: Justice and the gospel: Unavoidable, yet misunderstood

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A strange cloud is brewing above Dallas: both the Southern Baptist Convention and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship—a group founded in response to the conservative resurgence within the SBC—will be holding their annual meetings in the same city, in the same week.

For all of the theological foci that divide these two groups, around issues of gender, sexuality, missions and so forth, one topic will inevitably be broached at both meetings: what it means for Christians to talk about justice.

## The nature of justice

In the upcoming Southern Baptist Convention, a [resolution](#) has been submitted condemning social justice in the name of the gospel.

The resolution on offer is confused and conflates all pursuits of justice under hand-waving accusations of “Marxism and Postmodernism,” but the concern at its core is this: that any appeals to justice, framed as a concern for social equality, are alien to the gospel—distractions at best and heresies at worst.

Whatever one makes of the proposal—even if it is not raised from the floor—the proposal is not alone in broaching the topic, as the recent firing of [Paige Patterson](#), former president of Southwestern Seminary also casts a shadow, as issues of sexual assault will inevitably be in the water. Last year’s failure to denounce white supremacists and the continued questions over immigration will likely make appearances.

At the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship meeting, questions of justice will likewise be raised, as the recent [Illumination Project](#) will raise further questions about sexuality, hiring practices and gender.

Whether you think of justice as a distraction to the gospel, or something which is inseparable to the Good News, it is impossible to avoid saying something about it.

In the first place, never speaking about justice as a Christian only leaves one option: that judges and governments always judge justly—and it takes only a cursory read of Scripture to avoid that conclusion.

But, secondly, to make justice—how we live among each other, and whether we are giving to one another what is due—something which is never spoken of, is to make the gospel into a completely abstract Good News.

## **‘The very call of God’**

In his oft-read classic, “Discipleship,” Dietrich Bonhoeffer makes this claim about the gospel: that the call of Christ does not approach as an abstract idea, or as a self-made demand, but as the very call of God in this time and this place.

In other words, God’s call is always a call into the world, to live faithfully as God’s creature in response to what God has done. When Christ confronts us through the preached Scripture, it is not as an abstract principle, but as a living question, calling the hearer to obedience then and now.

Hearing the call of God is not simply, he says, a call to life in the church, but a call to live as God’s people in the world.

It is to offer oneself to God’s work in service to the sufferings of the world, in imitation of the Christ who suffered for the world. To respond to the call

of Christ today cannot be done apart from responding to the Christ who upholds and redeems the world.

Any gospel which ignores this, he says, is avoiding the call of God in the name of serving “the Gospel,” putting an idea ahead of God’s actual calling.

## **‘We cannot do without justice’**

Worrying that our efforts to set the world right may displace Good News is a fair concern: making things right in the world is not the same as conversion; loving one’s neighbor is not the same thing as loving God.

And yet, in the logic of the kingdom of God, these are inseparable.

Responding to the call of the living God who upholds the world cannot be done without answering the call in the world we live, and with respect to what is preventing our neighbors from hearing a truly Good News from God.

If, when we think of “gospel,” we do not think of a Word of God which addresses the sin of creation in order to set the world right, we are not thinking of Christ’s own word.

And if, when we think of “gospel,” we do not think of a Word which transforms and alters the suffering of creation, we are at risk of thinking of the proverbial “other gospel.”

If, when we think of the gospel, we do not think of a Good News which calls people to conversion and the world to account, we have forgotten that Good News of Jesus is one which brings down the high and raises up the low, both the high in heart and status, and the low in spirit and stature.

The justice of how we live with one another is neither a distraction, nor is it everything. We will have disagreements about what justice entails and

about how best to go about this, as frail creatures of dust often do.

But avoiding uncomfortable conversations about justice as either beside-the-point or the whole of the matter is to miss the mark.

True justice means responding to God's offer of mercy, and mirroring this in the world, giving as we have been given to, making peace as we have been given peace.

The world is a broken and beautiful place, and to neglect the difficult call of God in the name of an abstract gospel or a personal conversion is to fall short of what is just.

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