

# Voices: Only hearing what we listen for—on “social justice & the gospel”

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Two weeks ago, John McArthur and a group of his associates met in Dallas to draft a statement entitled “[Social Justice & The Gospel](#).” The statement, while intended to shore up the ethics of Scripture against alien agendas, is well-intended but misses the mark.

As a way of beginning, let me say this: justice in the world is intrinsic to God’s good news in Jesus, that the kingdom of God has come near, and that we are to repent and receive it. It is not possible for us to divide the call of Jesus into two discrete parts, somehow calling us to repentance without calling us to account for the damage our sin does to our neighbors.

In light of this assertion, the question I want to address first is whether the statement is rightly afraid or is making enemies out of friends.

The statement begins by stating they are “concerned that values borrowed from secular culture are currently undermining Scripture” in a broad array of areas, concerns which led them to author the 12-point document.

The first question that must be answered here is whether the concerns are correct, to which the answer must be “No,” with an asterisk. There is, to be sure, a problem with being a people who are not being shaped by the Scriptures. But my question is whether this statement remains blinded to *how* we are shaped by the Scriptures.

# **Relationship between Scripture and living in the world**

Christians live in plural environments; we are never shaped just by the Scriptures, but also by the world in which we come and go all the time.

When we hear preaching—of any doctrinal persuasion—it is preaching given with a full set of assumptions shaped in the forge between heaven and earth. There is nothing to be done about this traffic between the world and the church. To live in the world and to have our thinking and discipleship permeated by the assumptions of technology, labor, politics and media is part of the deal.

But, scripturally, this borrowing of values is not a problem. Rather, it is meant to be—to borrow an image from Augustine—the Egyptian gold we melt down to worship God. We reclaim the things of the world for God—however they come to us—both with respect to the goods of the world and with respect to the thinking of the world.

When the statement disparages, for example, “postmodern ideologies derived from intersectionality, radical feminism, and critical race theory,” the drafters are right to warn us of ideology but wrong to dismiss these out of hand.

For to read the Bible is to read it through the only bodies we have, meaning our theologies come with limits born out of flesh and blood. By reading Scripture with any tool, we are invited to hear a corner of Scripture that would have been silent to us otherwise.

## **Examples of reading Scripture through**

## **the eyes of others**

To hear the story of Ruth, for example, from the perspective of critical race theory is to remember Ruth was a migrant, a Moabite, an outsider, and her success in the land of Israel was due to her knowing how to negotiate the world in that way.

To hear the story of Joseph, as another example, longing for his bones to be buried in Israel is to remember Joseph—an Israelite—is uneasy in the land of Egypt. It is to hear Scripture as the story of the embodied faithful and to hear God's call to us in that way.

Hearing Scripture in this embodied way—and being aware of the corners that these discourses bring to light—is not to disparage Scripture, but continually to be open to the depths of Scripture's wisdom and truth that searches out the waywardness in us.

## **Scripture shows us how God interacts with people as people**

To dismiss these ways of hearing the Scriptures is—for the framers of the statement—largely a luxury. The discourses they disparage—those of the postmodern critique, critical theories and feminism—can, when used in the service and in the company of doctrine, help us to see corners of Scripture which we might not otherwise see.

As creatures of dust, our vision is limited and our eyesight weak. When we—in the words of Isaiah—leave the roads crooked and do not fill in the valleys, we may do so because we do not see the roads and valleys about which people are concerned.

The question we should put to these embodied ways of reading Scripture is

not, “Why should we use them?” The question we should ask is, “By God’s grace, how can we not use them?”

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