Voices: Sharers in sin, partakers in Christ: On “Social Justice & the Gospel”

October 3, 2018

In parts one and two, we examined how the conversations of social justice help us hear the corners of Scripture and how justice—scripturally—means taking seriously not only the justice owed to the person, but how God’s justice ties us to the world in which we live. In this final part, I want to take up the biggest concern of the “Social Justice & the Gospel” statement: whether sin—socially considered—is a distortion of the Scriptures.

On the one hand, the notion that all persons—regardless of time and place—are affected by sin is uncontroversial. Whether one believes in “original sin” as articulated by Augustine and Calvin is beside the point. All of us down the line from Adam are prone to creating the world in our own image and to using the world accordingly. We all love ourselves more than our neighbors, and we all certainly love ourselves more than God.

Coming to terms with our understanding of sin

The target the authors of this statement have in mind, however, is something beyond this notion of sin; namely, that we might *benefit* from the sins of others.

Many forms of social justice turn on this assumption: that our world will not be changed by mere random acts of kindness, but by addressing deep inequities perpetuated over long periods of time.

Unspoken by the authors of the statement—but implicitly named—is the misunderstood notion of "white privilege," that whites have undeserved benefits in the world simply by virtue of their skin.

To be white—as I am—is to have benefited from generations of discriminatory attitudes and laws. Whether one looks at educational distribution, policing, criminal sentencing patterns, instances of online harassment or the lengthy histories of legal discrimination, we are hard pressed to say this is not the case.

Should we, then, view these benefits as not simply unjust legacies which stretch into the present, but *sins* to be repented of? What would it actually *look like* to repent of these things?

Ample reflection has been done on this question, and I will not repeat it here. Suffice it to say, however, the sins of each person are—by origin—their own act. But it does not mean we must do nothing with the inheritance of the sins of another.

Opening our eyes to the injustices of our sin

The justice of God is a justice which seeks to heal our souls, our bodies and our world. As such, focusing only on what I have done and left undone—sins of commission and omission—is to remain blind to the way sin operates.

Sin, at one level, is incredibly boring: repeating the same patterns over and over again. We continually are tempted to be God and tempted to step on our neighbors. But the ways of sin, over time, are incredibly clever. When unexamined, sin seams into our world and becomes seen as simply "the way things are."

Housing patterns—built on racist lending practices—become seen as natural. Educational disparities—stymied by decades of inequitable funding—become seen as student choices.

As difficult as these things are to account for, the Christian cannot—once being made aware of them—leave sin unexamined. We must not be afraid to open up these thinly covered wounds.

The justice of God means coming to terms with the many ways in which the world we inhabit is built on legacies of sin so quiet that we no longer hear them. Seeing social justice as part of the gospel does not mean we no longer preach conversion, but that we add to our preaching the call for the conversion of the worlds in which we live.

To be sure, the sins of the father may not always be a curse to the seventh generation. Sometimes, the sins of the father become the basis for our successes, legacies and generational habits from which we are called to repent.

To live into the justice of God is to realize that seeing our sins and being called to act is part of the gracious work of a God who calls for the valleys to be filled in and the mountains to be laid low.

Myles Werntz is associate professor of Christian ethics and practical theology and the T.B. Maston Chair of Christian Ethics at Hardin-Simmons University's Logsdon Seminary in Abilene. Email him at Myles.Werntz@hsutx.edu.