

AS THE LATE Jerry Falwell reflected on his career as a leader of conservative Christianity in the United States, he regretted that he had been on the wrong side of the civil rights movement. Like many white churchgoers, Falwell had embraced the cultural racism that denied citizens of African descent equal protection under the law. In effect, many Southern church members had wrapped the gospel of Jesus Christ in a white sheet of segregation, oppression, and violence.

In 1963, while sitting in a jail cell in Birmingham, Alabama, Martin Luther King Jr. wrote a letter to white clergy in which he lamented their acquiescence to the evils of racism. King believed when the church is silent on matters of justice, the church has become “lukewarm”; that is, the prophetic voice of the church has given way to a “weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound.”

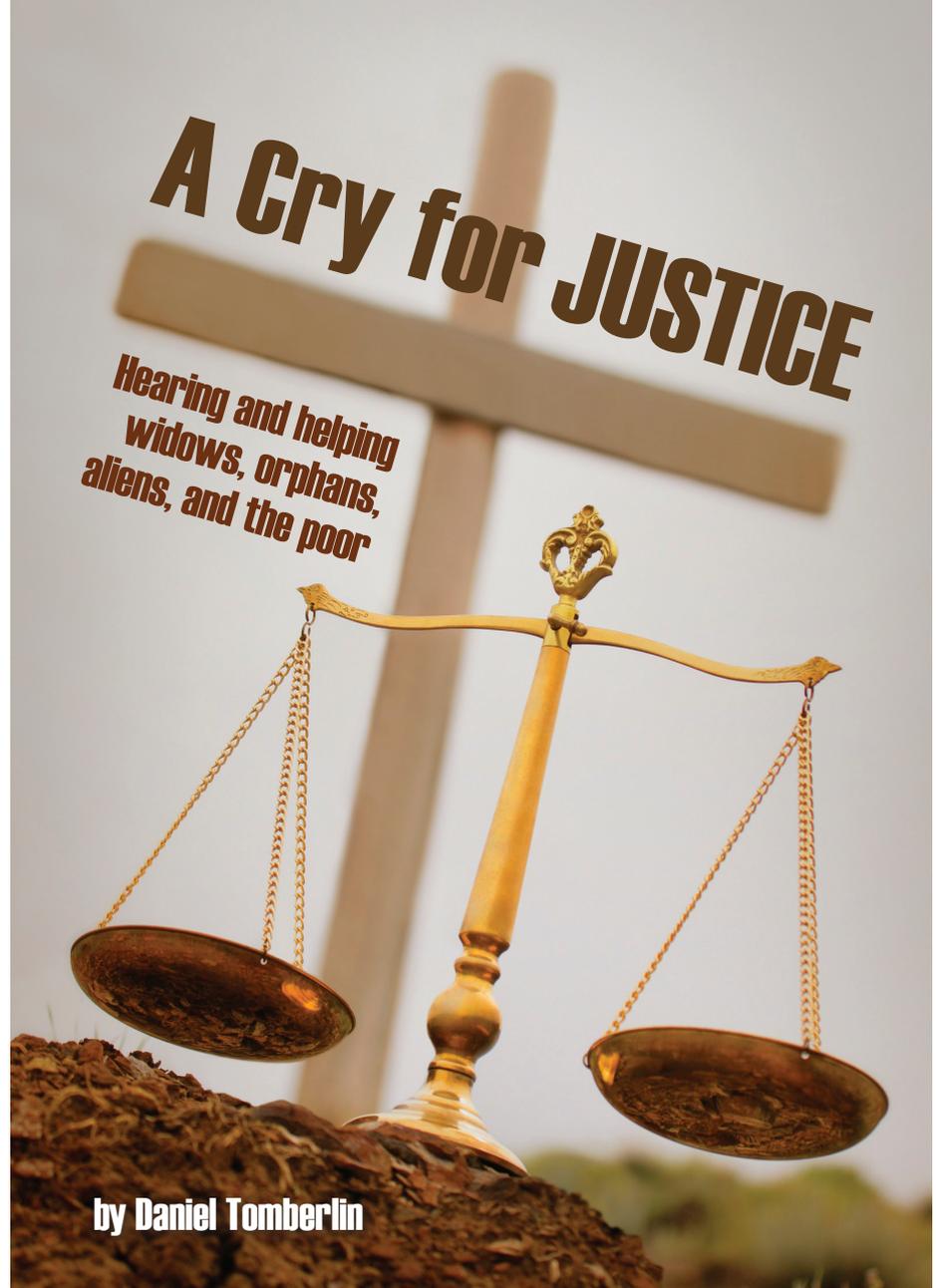
King’s remarks reflect a Pentecostal spirituality in which the voice of the Spirit is heard through prophetic utterances. The first utterance of the Holy Spirit is the groaning and lament of creation that has been subjected to corruption (Rom. 8:20-22). The groaning of the Spirit can be heard in the cries of humans who have been denied the dignity of justice. The church is called to give voice to the Spirit’s cry for deliverance and justice.

Called to Bless

God’s call to Abraham was that his posterity would be a blessing to “all the families of the earth” (Gen. 12:3).* Abraham’s seed was called “to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice” (18:19).

To “do justice” is to be proactive in protecting the interests of the oppressed and disenfranchised—the poor, widows, orphans, and aliens (Isa. 1:17; Jer. 22:3). The ancient prophets of Israel cried out against a covenant people who had forsaken God’s concern for righteousness and justice. Micah declared, “What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (6:8; cf. Isa. 56:1).

When the people of Israel forsook God’s call to righteousness and justice, God exiled them to Babylon. Like Sodom



by Daniel Tomberlin

before her, Jerusalem had “arrogance, abundant food and careless ease, but she did not help the poor and needy” (Ezek. 16:49; cf. Lam. 4:6). Generations later, John the Baptist warned the descendants of Abraham that God would cut down the tree that could not produce the fruit of righteousness and justice (Luke 3:8-9). Likewise, Jesus rebuked those who “disregard justice and the love of God” (11:42).

Anointed to Deliver

Jesus defined *justice* as an expression of God’s love. In an act of divine justice, Jesus gave His life for the redemption of the world. Likewise, Jesus called His disciples to lay down their lives for the sake of the Gospel. He warned them, “Go; behold, I send you out as lambs in the

midst of wolves” (Luke 10:3). In other words, the world is a dangerous place in which human predators seek to subjugate, manipulate, and exploit the weak and powerless. All too often, these predatory practices are embedded within the culture and enshrined in law.

For example, throughout human history, the institution of slavery has been protected by law and religious tradition. Even today, the slave trade flourishes. Millions of young men and women are abducted and forced to work as sex slaves. This illegal practice flourishes because of humans who have power, wealth, and unbridled lust. Throughout the world, poor laborers are often exploited in mines, factories, and farms, woefully underpaid for backbreaking work. Human predators

dehumanize their prey, robbing them of the dignity of God's image.

To all those who are held captive by corruption and injustice, Jesus declared, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim release to the captives" (Luke 4:18). Justice resists dehumanization and empowers human dignity in God's image. The Christian vision of *justice* means the subjugated, exploited, and enslaved are to be received as beloved brothers and sisters (Philem. 16).

Obstacles to Justice

Human history is a major obstacle in the pursuit of justice. We suffer from hate, conflict, and warfare passed from generation to generation. Everyone has a story of injustice that has poisoned the hearts and minds of entire populations. In the United States, the injustice of four centuries of slavery and Jim Crow laws continue to haunt our national conscience. Meanwhile, images of 9/11 have convinced many Americans that all Muslims are terrorists.

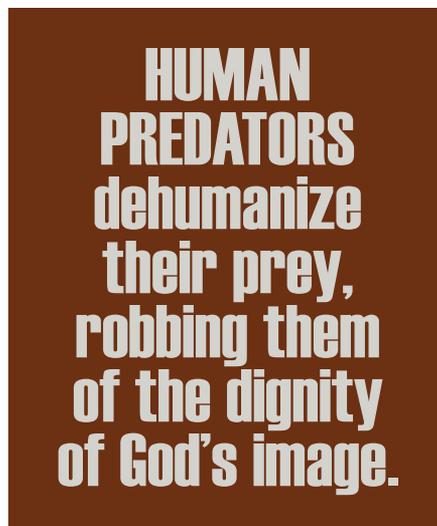
Fear often provokes conflict and promotes injustice. So, in order for justice to prevail, we must not allow our history to define our future. Fear must be overcome by hope. The goal of the Gospel is a new heaven and new earth in which righteousness and justice prevail (2 Peter 3:13). Even in this present age, the kingdom of God breaks forth and offers new possibilities for justice, righteousness, and peace.

Willing to Confess

The Christian concept of justice is not "an eye for an eye"; rather, it is "love your neighbor" and "love your enemies" (Matt. 5:38, 43-44; 19:19). Therefore, justice requires confession, forgiveness, and grace. *Confession* means we must tell the truth about ourselves. We must be willing to confess our acts of personal or national injustice and make restitution (Luke 3:8). Those who have been exploited by acts of injustice must be willing to forgive their oppressors. Both acts are empowered by divine grace.

After decades of apartheid and racial warfare, Nelson Mandela was elected president of South Africa in 1994. Many feared a civil war between the white

minority and the black majority, but it did not happen. Instead, Mandela's government sought justice for all parties. The government established the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which enabled "South Africans to come to terms with their past on a morally accepted basis and to advance the cause of reconciliation." Those who supported apartheid were offered amnesty if they would tell the truth. Many police and military officers have come forward with horrendous stories of state-sponsored terror against the black majority. With their confession, they are forgiven. Reconciliation is the goal of justice. Justice and righteousness can prevail only when abundant grace is exercised.



The Path to Justice

Government is ordained by God to resist tyranny and protect the rights of citizens and aliens (Rom. 13:1ff). Regrettably, issues of justice often get lost amid the clamor of political discourse. Politics is about the distribution of power, and the protection of the powerful. Those who make the loudest noise often suppress the voices of the oppressed. Biblical justice transcends the politics of power in favor of grace and compassion.

There are many justice issues that currently dominate the political conversation in the United States: abortion, homosexuality, immigration, racism, religious tolerance, and sexism. As ambassadors of Christ, Christians must be engaged in the national political conversation, "as sheep in the midst of wolves . . . shrewd

as serpents and innocent as doves" (Matt. 10:16). In other words, Christians must endure suffering with joy, practice discernment, and promote peace.

As ambassadors of Christ, Christians must place the interest of the kingdom of God above their personal, national, or cultural interests (2 Cor. 5:20).

Justice protects life, promotes human flourishing, and empowers the freedom to express the image of God. To *do* justice means the poor, hungry, homeless, and imprisoned are cared for in the name of Christ (Matt. 25:34-40).

Justice requires that immigrants and refugees be welcomed in the name of Christ (Lev. 19:34; Heb. 13:2).

Justice means saint and sinner, Christian and non-Christian, are treated with honor and respect (Rom. 12:17; 2 Cor. 8:21; 1 Peter 2:12, 17).

Even as Christians seek to make disciples of all nations, justice requires religious liberty and tolerance for the sake of peace (Heb. 12:14; cf. 2 Kings 5:15-19).

In the heat of the debate about homosexual marriage, the Cathy family (owners of the Chick-fil-A franchise) publicly affirmed their belief in traditional marriage. As a result, their businesses were targeted by gay-rights advocates. So, Dan Cathy acted justly. Following the counsel of Jesus—"Make friends quickly with your opponent" (Matt. 5:25)—Cathy reached out to a leader of the lesbian/gay movement, Shane Windmeyer. Their conversations changed neither mind, but they grew to respect each other. Windmeyer declared himself to be Dan Cathy's friend.

Dan Cathy's outreach to the lesbian/gay community offers a model of Christian engagement in a pluralistic society. Just as Jesus sat and dined at the table with sinners, Christians must learn to sit at the table of dialogue with opponents. Not every sinner will be converted. However, in this present age, justice is about befriending unbelievers while upholding the Word of God. ☩

** All Scripture quotations are from the New American Standard Bible.*

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