



# PUBLIC JUSTICE *REVIEW*

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## HOW SHOULD WE THEN BE FORMED?

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### Re-forming Citizens for a Just Politics

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Let me begin with a confession: I have no memory of virtually all the church services I've ever attended in my life, even those from a few weeks ago. That's obviously not to say that they didn't have an impact on me, but it is slightly perturbing to think that such events slip so easily from one's mind. I doubt I'm unusual in that respect.

Yet a handful keep returning to my mind with complete clarity. One, in the Netherlands, was an annual service for residents of a home for mentally disabled individuals. Led by the home's chaplain, several residents actively participated in the service by reading Scripture, playing in the worship band, lighting candles, or responding enthusiastically when their name was called out. It was a moving experience of "the tongue of the speechless singing for joy" (Isaiah 35:6).

Another, in Grand Rapids, MI, sticks in my mind because of a simple, single moment: an Egyptian woman sang the Lord's Prayer in Arabic. This was the first time I'd heard this prayer, indeed any prayer, sung in what many in the West have tragically come to regard, consciously or not, as "the language of the enemy." Unexpectedly, it touched me profoundly.

There's another service I didn't actually attend but will not likely forget. A central London church recently commissioned a dramatic artwork, "[Suspended](#)," composed of discarded refugees' clothes, and hung it right over the front of the church throughout the Christmas season. To have celebrated, under that artwork, the birth of Jesus into a family that would

soon go through the experience of being “suspended” as refugees would surely have left an indelible impression.

Such worship moments don’t just tell, they show. Indeed, they don’t just show, they shape. They don’t simply exhort us verbally to “care for the vulnerable” or “be reconciled to your enemies.” They bring the vulnerable, the forgotten or “the enemy” audibly, visually, viscerally into the very presence of the worshipping community as it stands under the grace and call of God, confronting it with the questions, “Who is my neighbor?” and “How then shall we live?”

Such liturgical happenings carry the potential to awaken in us not just mental assent to an ethic of solidarity and justice, but an embodied desire for them. They are what James K. A. Smith [in his interview](#) calls “love-shaping practices.” Alongside many other formative ecclesial practices—including the right kind of preaching—they hold out the prospect of shaping us communally to become “re-formed citizens” equipped for a politics of solidarity and justice.

The burden of Smith’s engaging and insightful new book, *Awaiting the King*, is how the church can become a community that is able to form disciples for lives of public faithfulness—not through some political education program, but through the regular performance of its own liturgical, diaconal, catechetical, and missional rhythms. In such a church, you would never have to ask the question, “What does the Gospel have to say about public life?” because the entire experience of “being church” would continually induct you into posing that question and, together, discerning wise and brave responses to it.

Responding to the timely challenge laid down in *Awaiting the King*, the articles in this series will explore various dimensions of how the church could form us for a politics of solidarity and justice. It’s one thing to devise a robust and elegant set of principles to inform Christians how to think faithfully about politics, but if there aren’t any “re-formed” Christians who have been nurtured to enact those principles concretely, what have we gained?

## **The Dynamic Summons of Biblical Justice**

The Center for Public Justice has long sought to show that there is no dichotomy between principle and practice: the forming of considered, coherent, biblically rooted political principles is itself one of the practices needed for the church to engage responsibly and effectively in politics. And in the elaboration of its own principles over forty years, CPJ has been constantly learning from the history of its own and others’ practices, successful or otherwise.

So when Christians lurch into a clamorous rush to, for example, “win the nation back for Christ” *uninformed* by such principles, but also *unformed* by love-shaping practices...well, we see the detritus of such well-meaning but unreflective adventurism littered all over the last few

decades of Christian public engagement, and not only in the United States. Such efforts, in spite of occasional successes, are incapable of undoing what Smith calls the *deformations* of our loves worked upon us by our surrounding culture, leaving us powerless to transform either ourselves or those corners of our culture over which we might have some modest influence.

The imperative to intentionally and patiently nurture Christians for faithful public service, and to liberate us from what Smith calls “liturgical capture” by the culture of modernity, should itself be seen as an indispensable implication of the principle of public justice. To be honest, it hasn’t always been. Our methods of political formation have been too cerebral, too individualistic, and too inattentive to the pressures of “deformation.”

At bottom, we need this work of formation because biblical justice isn’t an abstract ideal but a dynamic summons to “establish justice in the gate” (Amos 5:15)—not just to commend it but to deliver it, and to do so in the “gate” of the city, the many arenas of our public life. For, like the whole word of God, the “word” of justice isn’t a proposition to which we must merely intellectually assent, nor an unattainable horizon forever beyond our reach. Rather, as Moses exhorts the people of God poised at the very border of the land in which they were to embody justice, “the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so that you can do it” (Deuteronomy 30: 14).

The striking thought that the word of justice is near us turns out to be a window on the place of politics in the entire biblical narrative of creation, sin, redemption, and restoration. The immediate context of this verse has Moses exhorting the people of Israel that the *torah* was near to them—it had been given to them—so that they couldn’t get away with the excuse that God’s call for justice is “up in heaven” or “beyond the sea” (Deuteronomy 30:14).

But to take the full measure of this verse we must read it both backwards and forwards: the word of God for justice is embedded in the very fabric of created being from the beginning, is sustained mercifully by God in the face of persistent human injustice, and will be gloriously restored and transformed in the new creation. And we can witness evocative and healing signs of such restored justice even now as we “await the King,” for the kingdom has already arrived among us in Jesus’s first coming (Luke 17: 21). God’s call for justice is always and already near us so we too have no excuse not to work to establish justice in our own gates.

## **We Are Created to Seek Justice**

Fundamentally, justice is near us because we have been constituted by the Creator as justice-seeking, justice-desiring, *justice-capable* beings. Without sin, we would have acquired an unhindered love and apprehension of what justice requires. Solidarity—a precondition of justice—would have been experienced not as a burden but as an opportunity to deepen community and exchange God’s gifts in wider human circles.

Imagine a prosperous community dwelling in a fertile valley, hearing of an isolated settlement across a mountain range that was at risk of poor harvests. (Even in the original creation, there would have been many of the normal weather variations or microclimates, and humans would in any case have had to undergo agricultural learning processes regarding where and how to farm.) We can imagine that community immediately building a road to ensure a secure supply of food for the remoter settlement, opening up both communities to the benefits of trade and wider cultural exchange.

Before justice acquired a reactive, corrective inflection due to the fall, it was what Nicholas Wolterstorff calls “primary justice”—a rich relational lattice enabling the development of flourishing human societies in tune with God. It still is. Humans need just familial, neighborly, cultural, geographical, economic, and political relationships if they are to fulfill their original calling to be images of God tending and unfolding creation’s gifts. Justice is constitutive of the Gospel because it is constitutive of being human. Human history testifies to our necessary, stumbling, occasionally impressive, and often oppressive, attempts to build institutions that facilitate the doing of justice in each of these areas.

This applies to political institutions as much as others. However twisted and diminished our own polities are, that is why they exist, why we can’t do without them, and why we must be continually seeking to form and reform them wherever God providentially affords us openings to do so. As Smith puts it, “the cultural work of creating polities is something that is demanded by the very nature of creation. The cross, resurrection, and new creation do not displace that calling: they renew it” (p220).

Among other things, that requires us to discern carefully what political institutions are fitted to do, and what lies within the remit of other institutions. And that is not necessarily, as Smith implies, to lapse into a “spatialized” view of faith and politics (p8) but only to suggest that each institution can cooperate for the common good by offering what it alone can supply.

### **The Task of the Church for a Just Politics**

One of the deepest impacts of the fall, which is not a one-off event but a continual, debilitating drag on human goodness, is to have so dulled and twisted our God-given desire for, and ability to discern, justice, that we are constantly in danger of descending to the level of the people of Nineveh who “didn’t know their right hand from their left,” a reference to ignorance about justice (Jonah 3:11). While humans almost universally seem to display some sense of justice, what we think justice requires, and how much we desire it, are now profoundly misshapen.

So Smith is entirely right to argue that one of the distinctive tasks of the church, as the gathered, faltering but worshipping community of the being-redeemed, is to recalibrate our

perception of justice and to re-shape and re-form our desire for it. *Awaiting the King* frames a challenging and inspiring agenda for how it might do that.

The “gathered” church sends us out as the “dispersed” church to bear witness in whatever fields of public life members are called to occupy. Not to take them over, but to “wait for and hasten” the coming of the King (2 Pet. 3: 12). Smith rightly reminds us that the aim of Christian public engagement is not to establish a separate island of justice but to be a leaven of justice within the wider societies we find ourselves thrown into (p55).

Thus when we speak of justice in the “gate,” this means showing solidarity with our fellow citizens by employing languages that are conducive to the *common* good, that don’t speak of *public* justice in a *private* language—an idiosyncratic one we know will obstruct successful communication—that shuts down dialogue and stymies cooperation. Especially in the face of today’s reduction of public deliberation to mere assertions of rival identity claims, or worse, the dangerous slide into “post-truth” politics, Christians must redouble their efforts to shore up what remains of a common public language.

But there will very likely be moments when our distinctive vision of justice will and must come explicitly to the fore in our contributions to public debate. Perhaps on some occasions we simply won’t be able to represent our specific political goals with integrity—a piece of legislation, a policy shift, a constitutional reform—without disclosing our deepest convictions. Others of different convictions will find themselves in the same boat, and so we must work for a democratic culture that facilitates rather than obstructs such convictional integrity. Smith recognizes and affirms this. The “principled pluralism” that CPJ has long promoted seeks just such a culture.

Yet our distinctive vision must, of course, always remain dynamically operative, shaping what we say and do even when we don’t show our workings in a public setting: it must be *present* even when not *presented*. Smith urges us to be more alert to the fact that it will do so only so long as we are being constantly liturgically molded as justice-seeking citizens within our “gathered” ecclesial communities.

Without that deep, ongoing experience of formation, we will face the constant risk of “naturalizing shalom”—of exchanging a vision of Christ’s kingdom for whatever the conventional wisdom of the day deems natural. Shalom is not merely “biblical language for progressivist social amelioration. Shalom is a Christ-haunted call to long for the kingdom come” (p89).

Take, for example, principled pluralism, an idea that has been defended by Reformed Christians as one implication of Christ’s kingship for a religiously divided polity. It has been justified as one specifically political outworking of Jesus’s own words, “let the wheat and the

tares grow together until the harvest” (Matt: 13.30). But Smith argues that principled pluralism risks lapsing into a “macroliberalism” that ends up merely echoing a secularized version of state neutrality (Ch. 4). That challenge merits a careful response from those who, like CPJ, seek to deploy the idea in public policy.

Yet I would want to insist that our goal—as in all dimensions of Christian public faithfulness—is not to be distinctive for its own sake, but rather to be faithful to the light we have received. Having striven to do that, we can be relaxed about apparent or real convergences between what we say and what our liberal polities say, as Smith seems himself to recognize.

In *Awaiting the King*, Smith prompts, prods, and provokes us to address these and many other aspects of the challenge of how the church can equip us for the practice of a just politics. The book, and this series, invite us into a fresh and timely conversation about what it would take for us to become faithful citizens in our fragile and fracturing public squares. I hope many will energetically join that conversation.

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