



# PUBLIC JUSTICE *REVIEW*

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## *PUBLIC JUSTICE REVIEW: A MANIFESTO*

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### 5. The Postures of Public Justice

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Posture is powerful. I learned this a number of years ago at a small public park in Hoboken, New Jersey. All it took was a look from father pushing his daughter on a swing.

I'm not quite sure how much time passed between when his nose first curved upward and when his eyes cut through the space between us to stop me in my tracks. At some point however, in the ensuing nanoseconds, there was a definitive moment when his "looking up" transitioned to a glance, and then almost instantaneously to a glare. And this glare—oh, this glare—pierced. It didn't have a voice, but it undeniably shouted. It didn't have hands, but I definitely felt accosted. It laid into me in a way that no tangible weapon ever could. With just a glare, he threw me a million miles away from that place. It was so unexpected and unsettling that I was incredulous that it was given by a man, and not a dragon or a devil. I didn't know eyes could be so precise, and so sharp! I didn't know they could be so divisive. With just a glare, I knew that this stranger had no intention of sharing that swing.

That day, I became acutely aware of presence. I was almost immediately clued in on the effect that being somewhere can have on others, and along with this, the force that our posture can have on others as we inhabit shared spaces. How we hold and move ourselves can not only throw someone's day out of sync, it can ruin their entire weekend. A simple glare in a public park can cut so deeply that it makes someone want to crawl back to their living room couch for the rest of the weekend. It's a little absurd to think about, but less-than-a-minute movements of the eyes can tear down years of reverie and harmony built up in a familiar public place. That day, I realized that the subtlest movements of our bodies can wound or welcome our neighbor. They can push them away from us, or they can pull them a little closer.

**JUSTICE IN THE FLESH**

That isolated experience of mine a few years ago is part of a larger problem many of us are encountering today. We have witnessed it during the 2016 presidential campaigns, experienced it at our child's middle school game or dance, or were surprised by it at a church conference or art show. We've discerned it while scrolling through comment threads on social media or listening to radio talk shows on our way to work. North America discourse is hostile. Offensive trolling, dismissive interrupting, aggressive shouting, and assertive ranting have become the norm. Many of us have been on both the receiving *and* giving end of this hostility. What's heartbreaking is that this hostility has not only become normal, it's become necessary. If you want to be heard nowadays, you have to be willing to shout. If you want to be taken seriously, you need to start a few fights now and again. If you're unwilling to do either, you may just have to ensconce yourself in your own little "private circle", because the "public square" is not for you.

Our everyday interaction seems to be soaked in this hostility. We're caught [between the Charybdis of fighting with hostility or the Scylla of fleeing it](#). Like any good tyrant, this hostility wants more than our voices and words. Insidiously, it courses through our veins and finds rest in our bones and muscles. It shows itself now and again in how we move our eyes, lips, nose, forehead, hands, shoulders, legs, fingers, hips, and back. We either move with hostility, or we move away from it. Either way, it informs our posture and the way that we gesture in response to others. For those who comply, it manifests itself as blatantly as looking away, walking away, rolling our eyes, shrugging our shoulders, turning our backs, throwing up our middle finger, or sticking our finger in someone's face. Other times, it might be displayed with much more subtlety: "tuning out" others when they are talking, impatiently waiting for our turn to speak and rebut their argument, refusing to look someone in the eye or shake their hand, or not calling on them during a Q & A because of their gender, color of skin, or party affiliation. We have patterned our bodies to inhabit shared spaces with the expectation that we will encounter hostility.

This increasing hostility didn't happen overnight: A self-centered and broken culture has formed us to roll our eyes, shrug our shoulders, grit our teeth, clench our fists, and look at our phone as a way to escape our neighbor. However, let's not reify culture and place the blame on nothingness—we have cultivated this attitude. We have normalized and expected this kind of posture in our interactions with others. This "we" includes the church. As Christians, We, too, practice hostile posture and gestures both inside and outside the sanctuary. Some of us are just hostile toward the hostility, but that's just the other side of the same coin. Many in society, including some in the church, have been charmed into thinking that discourse is about being right, and that those movements and gestures mentioned above are warranted in pursuing what's right. The ignorant and mistaken, (and reprobate, Muslim, liberal etc.) *deserve* rolled eyes or a finger once inch away from their face. These movements might just wake them up from their dogmatic slumbers. I would like to believe that deep, deep down we know this is the way of the world and not the way of the pilgrim. "Fight or flight" does not have to be the only response.

What if we treated this hostile posture as a matter of justice, as a matter of what others are due? In our everyday encounters with others, how others stand before us and move in response to us is either right or wrong, fair or unfair. We anticipate and expect right and fair treatment. When events don't go according to plan—whether at a park, museum, theatre, or municipal parking lot—we are offended, angered, and most likely hurt. This goes for the politician, lobbyist, midwife, and the security guard. I have yet to meet anyone who *likes* to have rolled eyes thrown at them, *enjoys* having a finger pointed in their face, or feels *edified* by shrugged shoulders. Rather, we long for the opposite: kind eyes, beneficial hands, and self-controlled shoulders. We all want more than a justice that is simply legislated, promulgated, and put down on paper. Instead, We want a justice that is lived out in the everyday movements of a person. A justice that is given in how we carry ourselves and the posture we hold as we interact with others in shared spaces. In this cultural moment, deep, deep down, the justice that “we the people” are really yearning for is one that is lived out in and through bodies—justice in the flesh.

## POSTURING JUSTLY FOR THE PUBLIC

The Bible has a lot to say about how we *use* our bodies and what we *do* with them (e.g., 1 Cor. 6:18; Col. 3:5). Did you know, however, that it also has a lot to say about how we *move* our bodies and interact with others (Genesis 4:5; 31:2; Numbers 6:24-26; Psalm 22:7; Ps. 109:25; Matthew 27:39; Prov. 6:12-14; Prov. 10:10; Prov. 16:30)? God seems to care as much about how we move our faces, head, eyes, ears, mouth, neck, shoulders, arms, legs, hips, and feet as he does about sexual purity and suicide, for example. The Heidelberg Catechism provocatively spells this out: “What does God require in the sixth commandment? That neither in thoughts, nor words, nor *gestures*, much less in deeds, I dishonor, hate, wound, or kill my neighbor, by myself or by another” (Question 105, Lord’s Day 40; emphasis mine). This is a Terrifying thought, isn’t it? We can dishonor, hate, wound, and even “kill” our neighbor in and through the way we move and interact with them. This is because there’s a right and fair way to treat a human being, in the way that God designed.

Often, when we talk about justice, we make it seem as though it is exhausted by a government’s work and our participation in it. Truth be told, however, I don’t see that as the primary focus of justice, and it doesn’t strike me as the most pivotal cultivation of public justice. There are many faces and facets to justice, and we can’t overlook some of the most basic ones. If I can put it this way: more justice needs to be given to the public than merely the formal matters of preserving human life, protecting rights, or working to provide tangible goods for every citizen. More justice needs be enacted for the public than on the institutional level by the state. Justice needs to be enacted on an *individual* level too, through *personal* patterns of interacting with our *neighbor*. Justice in how “we the people” (*publicus*) treat one another, including but not limited to, those who hold any kind of office.

Posture is a matter of public justice. On a nitty-gritty level, how do we work for public justice? How do we carry ourselves into lobbies, meetings, and debates? With what tone do we speak and move? In short, what posture do we bring to the processes and

policies that we are trying to establish? Does our presence and posture match our principles and policies? Are we being consistent? Saint Augustine was clued in on the importance of this: “Walking, standing, whatever movement you make, do nothing to offend anyone who sees you; but let everything befit your holy way of life.” Justice must be personified and incarnated in the everyday rhythms and movements of our living together. As we formulate a “Christian response” to some pressing, we can’t forget to respond like Christ.

Postures used to just be about bodies. Now, however, all media assumes interaction, and where there is interaction, there is movement. We posture as avatars and through profiles. We gesture on social media. Subtweeting as opposed to tagging, quote tweeting as opposed to commenting, and adding GIFs to an intense thread are all gestures on Twitter. Only sending a message in the subject line as opposed to the body of the email, or “e-bailing” are gestures we throw at our neighbor’s inbox. Many of us know exactly what these gestures mean and do to others. Justice for the public must be appropriated to these mediums and postures as well. We must be sensitive to how comments and criticism come across, even in the invisible realm that is the internet. How are our eyes, lips, nose, forehead, hands, shoulders, legs, fingers, hips, and back appearing on social media, and how are we using the “eyes, lips, nose, forehead, hands, shoulders, legs, fingers, hips, and back” of social media to interact with others?

## **LEANING INTO SHALOM**

Don’t get it twisted: this isn’t a manifesto for Toastmasters. This isn’t about using our bodies to *communicate effectively*; it’s about *conducting* ourselves *justly*. This is about treating our neighbor, those image bearers and inhabitants of shared land and spaces, as they ought to be treated. It’s about leaning into the shalom and society of tomorrow’s coming kingdom. Posturing justly is about being the type of creatures that we are designed to be, and becoming the kind of neighbors that we are destined to become. At the end of the day, we must resign ourselves to the reality that we do not *bring* the kingdom to earth through our advancements and achievements. I would like to think, however, that as pilgrims on our way to the promised land, we do *take* something with us into this new kingdom. We take the Spirit’s sanctifying and renewing work on us, We take our experiences and memories of living in this kingdom here and now, and We take the habits and practices that we’ve cultivated as we’ve lived in this kingdom here and now. The immigration policies we currently work for may not be applicable in the new earth, but how we interact with our neighbor and move our bodies as we fight for the fair treatment of foreigners might.

The life of the body needs to be cultivated as much as the life of the mind. Bearing our cross and anticipating the eschaton with earnestness as we pursue public justice is commonplace. Following Jesus back to the incarnation to learn how to carry ourselves as bodily beings and dwell with others in shared spaces, however, is something that we all need to do. Public justice, or justice for all people who are whole persons, involves cultivating a posture that invites, welcomes, and hosts others in shared spaces. How we interact with one another as embodied persons matters for the movements of a social body. We need a posture that pulls others into interaction with us on important issues,

not pushes them away. We need online, face-to-face, and over the phone articulation, gesticulation, and modulation that invites others to hear our struggles and concerns for the least of these. Not all of us may be wonks and pundits, but Christians who really care about what's right for all people will knuckle down and give due consideration to all expressions and opportunities for public justice, Even for something as silly and subtle as how we move our eyes at the park.

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