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Improv for the Kingdom: What Does It Mean to Equip People for Public Justice?

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As we seek to respond to the call to seek justice, it can be tempting to focus almost entirely on “what we do.” While certain times call for immediate and urgent action, it is important to recognize that our action flows from our character and our convictions. And we do not emerge from the womb with those convictions or character neatly and fully formed within us. As a mother to two young children, I wish it were otherwise! But the reality is that being equipped for public justice involves ongoing formation.

This formation includes intentionally exploring what we believe about God and God’s vision for the world, investigating how those beliefs can serve as a lens through which to view the public institutions, projects, and issues of our time, and by God’s ongoing grace becoming the kinds of people in whom conviction and character are wed. That is to say, as important as our conviction about public justice is the manner in which we seek public justice. As the people of God, we are called to manifest such things as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control in all of our endeavors.

None of this is meant to suggest that we can only begin the work of seeking justice when we’re old enough or trained enough to do so. It is meant, rather, to invite us to consider how we might go about the continual process of being formed in our convictions and our character as Christians as an essential part of how we imagine being equipped for public justice. What are some things the Holy Spirit might use to help us be formed into people who seek first His Kingdom and His righteousness in this world?

IMPROV AND PUBLIC JUSTICE

Before we begin exploring these formative components, it’s worth reflecting on the end goal of being equipped for justice. Two images that may be helpful as we consider this are both drawn from the world of theatre: the play and improv. A play traditionally involves a written script that guides each moment of the play – from the lines of dialogue that are scripted and memorized in advance by each

actor to stage directions about when to enter and where to stand. We often approach the Christian life as if it's a play, looking for clear lines and easy to follow directions.

The book of Galatians can be seen as Paul's response to an early Christian community's attempt to write a clear script for what it means to live as a Christian, including such things as the need for circumcision. The apostle Paul minces no words in communicating that life in Christ cannot be so easily scripted ("You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?" [Gal 3:1]). Paul resists this "playwright" approach to living out the gospel, calling the community in Galatia – and calling us today – to less scripted things like freedom in Christ, faith expressing itself through love, living by and being guided by the Spirit, working for the good of all (Gal 5 and 6).

These more general guidelines found within the New Testament are what lead scholars like [N.T. Wright](#) and [Samuel Wells](#) to propose improv as a more fitting image for living out the Christian life than the scripted play. In improvisational theatre, actors run with whatever settings and lines are given to them in the moment and then improvise, working with one another to go back and forth in unscripted dialogue. It takes a lot of practice and training to develop the skills to do improv well. The spontaneity in this case does not mean unpreparedness.

So, in our real lives as Christians, we don't know what exactly life will throw at us – what the exact setting will be, what specific response will be required, what particular public issues will present themselves. Could the writers of the biblical texts have anticipated the development of nuclear technology, or the possibility of human cloning? Not likely, which means they did not leave us specific rules we can memorize to know without a doubt our faithful Christian response. Although the biblical texts don't provide scripts to provide our specific Christian response to every particular issue of our day, they nevertheless have authoritative wisdom as we wrestle through how to faithfully engage with contemporary realities. In short, as we consider what it means to be equipped for public justice, our end goal is not determining with absolute clarity the definitive Christian view on every public matter of our time. The goal is to identify and engage in the training and practices that the Holy Spirit can use to help us do "improvisational discipleship" well, so we are prepared to discern and wrestle together as we engage with different contemporary realities.

THE CHARACTER OF OUR ENGAGEMENT

While the exact *content* of our responses to the public matters of our time may not be scripted, the New Testament does have a lot to say about the *character* of our response. If we turn again to Galatians, we read that the freedom we have in Christ and the call to live by the Spirit are supposed to manifest themselves as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. This fruit of the Spirit is the visible mark of those who are living by and being guided by the Spirit (Gal 5:22-25). Elsewhere, Paul suggests that our ability to discern how to live faithfully is connected to our love abounding more and more (Phil 1:9-11). And of course there is the well-known teaching of Jesus after he washes his disciples' feet: the world will know we are Jesus' disciples if we love one another (John 13: 34-35).

This consistent thread within Scripture is one of the reasons that we need to attend not only to the content of our responses to public justice but to the character of those responses. Writing about this, political scientist [David Ryden](#) calls us to remember that we need to address both what political issues we are to engage as Christians and *how* we engage as Christians. He notes that Christians today have

a reputation for being strident, defensive, and combative. By taking on these postures, we undermine our own public witness. Another political scientist, [Amy Black](#), reminds us that the famous love chapter of the Bible – 1 Corinthians 13 – also applies to politics. “Love is patient, love is kind, love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful.” What could it mean for our Christian engagement if we were to consider passages like 1 Corinthians 13 and Galatians 5 as important to being equipped for justice as discerning what to think about particular issues of our day?

ENGAGING THE BIBLICAL STORY

When my son was four, he went through a stage of drawing pictures and then wanting me to guess what they depicted. It was terrifying as, truthfully, I rarely knew what he had drawn but dreaded squashing his budding artistic creativity. I have hung on to one picture from this time that I sometimes use to help Christians consider justice, asking them if they would venture to guess what it is. I’ve gotten answers as wide-ranging as Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the fiery furnace and a day at the beach. Without some guidance, it’s very hard to make sense of the picture. But once I tell people what it is (a Hope College-Calvin College basketball game), aspects of the picture become much clearer. With the larger framework in place, they can make sense of the individual parts (that part, it turns out, is the three point line, that is a basket, and that cluster over there is a player making a shot).

So with justice: on our own, when we look out at the world, we don’t have a lot of clarity about how God might want us to view what we’re seeing. We need some guidance to make sense of the picture – its beautiful parts and its broken parts – and God has given us guidance in the words of Scripture. Learning and rehearsing the story of Scripture in our worship settings, group Bible studies, and personal times of reading ought to help provide the framework we need to shape our engagement with the world.

As we seek to allow our engagement with the Bible to shape our engagement with the world, we need to consider what framework we bring with us to Scripture. In my own journey, after coming to know Christ in early high school, I read the Bible every day. I did this for almost ten years before I heard that there might be a larger story that shaped the Bible, that context mattered, that books of the bible had different genres, all of which should shape our interaction with the biblical text. That being said, without realizing it, I did have a framework with which I was operating – a framework in which God cared only about individual salvation and called me, as a disciple, to expend all of my time and energy on calling others to individual salvation. I read every verse through that lens, which did not give me any idea why or how God would care about justice, culture, politics, or any of the other institutions that comprise our culture. I did not have the tools necessary to do the faithful improvisational work mentioned above.

That, of course, didn’t leave me without opinions or convictions about political matters. It just meant that they were shaped more by my family of origin, experiences, and exposure than by Scripture, the Christian tradition, and the community of faith. As scholars like [Alasdair MacIntyre](#) and [Stanley Hauerwas](#) have pointed out, conceptions of justice do not arise in a timeless, context-less vacuum. They are, rather, deeply rooted in particular traditions and schools of thought, not all of which are compatible with one another nor with Christian conceptions of what is right and just. This doesn’t mean we don’t have important things to learn about justice from other ways of thinking and living.

But it does require a certain posture before Scripture, a posture that Bonhoeffer scholar Derek Taylor calls “willed vulnerability,” in which the reader and the faith community of which that reader is a part are willing to be critiqued, changed, and challenged by what the Spirit reveals through the written word.ⁱ Writing in the context of a church that had largely capitulated to the political categories offered by Nazi Germany, Bonhoeffer believed this posture was crucial for the church to be able to respond faithfully to the political realities of its time.

As we seek to respond faithfully to the public realities of our time, we need ongoing engagement with the biblical story. As we undertake this engagement, we need to be open to the Spirit continuing to critique, change, and challenge our interpretations of the biblical text. This can happen as we allow preaching, teaching, communal Bible study, personal devotional time, authors, biblical commentators, historic voices, and global Christians to help us engage and interpret God’s word. For starting places to consider the story of Scripture in light of its public justice implications, I’d suggest [Robert Joustra’s version of the story in this issue](#) and the version that Bethany Hanke Hoang and I offer in [The Justice Calling](#).

COMMITTING TO WORSHIP

Worship is another place where God can equip us for the work of public justice, as in conversation with the biblical story the Spirit uses it to clarify our vision of God’s world and form in us the character that is to mark God’s people. Committing to worship as a part of being equipped for justice can seem counter-intuitive. I think back to my experience teaching undergraduates. Students who were outwardly focused, the ones most eager to change the world, often got antsy during their sophomore year. They didn’t have patience for the classroom when the needs of the world seemed so immense. Something similar can happen to Christian “justice warriors” when it comes to the church. Why do we need to sit in worship Sunday after Sunday when so many wrongs in the world need to be righted? Isn’t it indulgent or escapist to sit here in safety and comfort rather than to directly respond to the call to love our neighbors?

The impulse is understandable, but as we’ve already noted, what it looks like to seek justice is not always clear. We need help to discern what faithfulness looks like in different times and places. We need help to become the kind of people who can seek justice in ways that manifest the fruit of the Spirit. Worship, while ultimately intended to glorify God, is also a means of grace. Rather than being an escape from the world, it is intended to be a means by which the Spirit shapes us into people who see the world as God wants us to see it and who are sent forth into the world with God’s vision for it. Reflecting on this, Orthodox theologian [Alexander Schmemmann](#) writes,

The Church is not a society for escape—corporately or individually—from this world to taste of the mystical bliss of eternity. Communion is not a “mystical experience”: we drink of the chalice of Christ, and He gave Himself for the life of the world. ... It is the very communion with the Holy Spirit that enables us to love the world with the love of Christ. The Eucharist is the sacrament of unity and the moment of truth: here we see the world in Christ, as it really is, and not from our particular and therefore limited and partial points of view.

To be equipped to pursue God’s vision for this world, to seek first God’s kingdom, justice, and righteousness, we need to gather as God’s family in worship. Worship invites us to, in Schmemmann’s

words, “see the true reality of the world and thus discover what we must do” as we are “sent back into the world in joy and peace.”

To make this more concrete, let’s focus on one aspect of worship: communion. Rather than considering this a mystical escape from the world, what happens if we see it as a picture of life as God intended and redeemed it to be: a table where our reconciliation with Christ overflows into our fellowship with others, where everyone is equal, where we recognize our dependence on God and our calling to love and care for one another, where all are given food and drink. This is to consider, as [James K.A. Smith](#) writes, that, “the eucharistic feast is a tiny normative picture of the justice that characterizes the coming kingdom of God, where none go hungry.”

How might the Holy Spirit use our worship to form us into people who can see God’s intentions for the world, see where the realities of the world fall short of God’s intentions, and be sent forth into the world with Kingdom imagination? As we consider the calling to seek God’s kingdom, we need to consider that committing to a consistent community of worship can be one of the significant ways God equips us to seek His vision of justice in this world.

SEEKING WISDOM AND KNOWLEDGE FROM ORGANIZATIONS

The summer after I graduated from college, I had the privilege of attending a four-week seminar with Christians of my generation from different parts of the world. The goal of the seminar was to help us connect God’s Word with the realities of the world. This was the first time I learned of the larger story of Scripture and it was also my first introduction to an understanding of the gospel that included attending to social realities. After one convicting session on God’s heart for poverty, a friend in the seminar asked me if I would join her in passing out peanut butter and jelly sandwiches to some of the homeless population in the area. We had great intentions and zeal, yet our efforts were not very well-received; many of those to whom we offered the sandwiches grimaced when they heard our offer, refusing to take them. We were in London, England, and we had failed to take the time to learn that “jelly” means “jello” to your average Brit. Further, peanut butter is not as widespread as in the United States. “Peanut butter and jello” sandwiches did not end up going very far in serving anyone in this cultural context.

To put this differently, during our seminar, we were receiving robust biblical teaching connected to the narratives of Scripture, we were worshiping together, and through these we began to see some new ways God was calling us to engage the world. But these were not enough, crucial as these ingredients were to our growth as disciples. We needed to take our new passion and insight *and* learn more about how to connect these with engaging the world around us. In addition to taking the time to learn about cultural context and differences, it would have been prudent for us to learn from those who had been engaged in seeking the good of the city well before us.

This is [where the role of organizations is particularly helpful](#). We need to draw on the expertise, experience, history, relationships, and know-how of organizations as we seek justice. Sometimes this will look like learning from the wisdom and knowledge of older organizations as we try to implement new ideas and practices. Often it will look like joining in with work that is already being done, by organizations with institutional history and relational capital. Nationally, organizations such as Christian Community Development Association and Center for Public Justice are helpful resources, while locally a range of groups may offer opportunities for engagement.

CONCLUSION

This is clearly far from a full account of what it means to be equipped for the work of public justice. We could go on to address the importance of engagement with thoughtful works of fiction, non-fiction, and the arts to shape our sense of what's really at stake for people and institutions; the need for intentional conversation partners from our faith tradition and other traditions and perspectives; and the significance of ongoing practices of lament and Sabbath-keeping to continue to shape our thinking and responses.

As important as it is to attend to the need for ongoing formation in the pursuit of justice, I want to close with the reminder that ultimately this work of justice is not on our shoulders. We have an active role to play as we respond with discernment to God's call to seek justice in this world, but the most decisive work of justice has already been done in and through the justifying work of Jesus Christ. In his life, death, resurrection, and ascension, Jesus Christ set right all that had gone wrong in this world; He continues to be at work making all things new; and He will come again to fully usher in the Kingdom of God that He inaugurated and called us to seek. Discerning what seeking God's Kingdom looks like, in concrete ways in particular times and places, is not straightforward even as we recognize that it is an enduring calling given to us by Jesus Christ. To do this improvisational work faithfully, we need to continually allow Scripture and worship to equip us for the work of public justice, all the while praying, "Your Kingdom come."

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ⁱ Derek Taylor, *Bonhoeffer's Hermeneutic of Discipleship* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, forthcoming).
