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# God's Church Seeks Biblical Justice

## DAVE BAST

The Bible has a lot to say about the subject of justice. Classic texts like Amos 5:24: But let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream; and Micah 6:8: What does the Lord require of you but to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God. Well, such passages remind us that this is a basic requirement for God's people in all times and all places; but that prompts a number of questions: What does justice really mean; what does it look like in our world; and what can any of us really do to help bring it to pass? Those are the kinds of questions we have been exploring on *Groundwork* recently; and today we will try to bring the subject to some sort of conclusion. So stay tuned.

## SCOTT HOEZEE

Welcome to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

## DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast; and Scott, as we have been saying repeatedly in these programs, we are talking about the biblical subject of justice. We are riffing, in large part, on a book called *The Justice Calling*, by Bethany Hanke Hoang and Kristen Deede Johnson; and today we are delighted to welcome back into our studios to talk about the book and the subject, and the scriptures, Kristen Johnson. So Kristen, thanks for coming.  
Kristen Deede

## JOHNSON

Thank you for having me.

## SCOTT HOEZEE

It is good to have you; and just briefly to recap, we have looked in this series at the link between God's righteousness and justice, and we have seen Bible-wide that is a very tight link. What does it mean for us to live just lives? It means that we live lives of holy righteousness in imitation of God. We looked in our second program at themes of lament over injustice, but also about how Sabbath keeping could restore some justice to our world. In our third program, Kristen, you told us about your and Bethany's work together to co-author this book; and we looked at Jesus as a model of justice when we look at the triple office of Jesus as prophet, priest and king; and now, in this final program, we want to talk a little bit more about these themes, but also probably get, as we go along, a little more practical in terms of how does the Church live this out?

## DAVE BAST

You know, the fact is that there are horrible things that happen in our world, and we tend to avert our eyes; you know, especially today with social media, Internet stories, it is kind of easy to pick and choose, and you can avoid things that are disagreeable or that you disagree with; and yet, in your book you tell many, many stories of dark and awful things; and I just wonder if that kind of got to you at some point, dwelling on that; and what would you say to someone who says: You know, I just like to think about happier things?  
Kristen Deede

## JOHNSON

It is so important to believe...Bethany, my co-author, and I both believe...to have actual people to connect these themes to; on their own words, like justice and injustice can seem lofty and abstract, but when you

connect them to actual people who are suffering, I think the Spirit uses that to do something within our souls, and to remind us that we are all fellow creatures, fellow redeemed children of God, and we need to heed these biblical calls.

So, there were definitely difficult moments; I would say there were actually equally difficult moments for me when I would watch the news or I would read news outlets. It is a dark time and there is a lot of darkness out there. One thing that Bethany really brought to this project through International Justice Mission was that as Christians we are called to move toward the darkness; that it is not our luxury to stay removed from the world's hardships, but looking at places like John, the light shines in the darkness but the darkness has not understood it. In other places, I think it is 1 John that light shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot overcome it; that in the light of Christ we have to move toward the world's suffering and trust that Christ's light is brighter and trust that in the light of Christ, we can do something to bring justice.

### **DAVE BAST**

That is great imagery, really; that light and darkness imagery, which runs consistently through the Gospel of John. You quoted from Chapter 1 there: The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has neither understood it nor overcome it; and then in Chapter 8 Jesus says: <sup>12</sup>I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness (we'll turn from the darkness ourselves), but will have the light of life. So, we too can maybe be light shining into these dark places.

### **SCOTT HOEZEE**

My friend, Dale Bruner, the wonderful Bible commentator who recently released a huge commentary on John... whenever he reads this passage aloud to teach it, when he reads that verse he always says: The light shinezzzz in the darkness; because he wants people to hear that present tense: It shines; it didn't shine long ago; it is shining now; it shines still in the darkness; and that is what we are called to do.

I like, Kristen, what you said you and Bethany wanted to emphasize, that if you don't get specific—if you don't connect names and people to sex trafficking or human trafficking or poverty, it remains a category, and that can be caricatured for one thing, but it also stays remote; which is why, and I think we have looked at this in a different connection on *Groundwork*, but of all the parables Jesus told, only one character ever had a name, and that was the poor man, Lazarus, in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus; and I think that was very intentional on Jesus' part. The poor aren't a category; they are individuals, and that is so important.  
Kristen Deede

### **JOHNSON**

And as you mentioned, Dave, there is so much access to information right now, it can feel very overwhelming and hard to know how to actually enter in; and also, you can pick and choose, as you said. So, how to be intentional... and Bethany talks about this in the book that for her it was actually putting her name on an e-mail list. She didn't realize slavery was still alive. She saw a poster. She said: What do I do? The person said: Write your name down. She thought: That's it? She started getting e-mails into her inbox—stories of actual people's suffering. God used that to shape her heart and her prayers and led her directly into this work; but we really believe wherever you are there is suffering happening around you, sadly, and there are places for you to connect. You don't need to move out to some foreign place to do that. So figure out how to intersect with actual people; and where maybe people in your church are connected, where their passions are, and find a way to enter in through a trusted organization or some people that you know that are maybe already on this journey.

### **DAVE BAST**

Yes; I just think personally... you know, there is a lot of talk about persecuted Christians throughout the world; how the Church is suffering in many places. When I hear that, I think of names and faces of people who I know in Iran, just because of circumstances and ministry that have allowed me to meet them and befriend them. So, it becomes much more real for me than just this abstract number of Christians, you know, here or there.

Kristen Deede

## **JOHNSON**

And even though I haven't met them, because I get the *Words of Hope* e-mails then I feel a connection and my heart is stirred through the Spirit to care more and pray more.

## **DAVE BAST**

Your book talks quite a bit about the International Justice Mission, and your co-author, Bethany, in fact, works for IJM. Say a little bit more about that organization.

Kristen Deede

## **JOHNSON**

So, the group was founded by Gary Haugen. He was a lawyer—is a lawyer—by training; and he was sent by the UN into Rwanda. He, I believe, was the first to discover the mass gravesites and become aware of the genocide that had taken place, and one of the questions God raised in his heart through that was: How can we help prevent this from happening again; and what does it look like for Christians to enter into this? So he returned to the States and eventually started this non-profit in Washington, DC. They work in countries all over the world. They are especially focused on violent injustice, and they are committed to working locally, so they will work in places where they can join with law enforcement, work through the court systems, work with locals to do investigations, and to do rescue and aftercare. So they are very committed to working within the structures of the time and place, and also to making sure they have good partnerships through every step of the process.

## **SCOTT HOEZEE**

The environmental movement adopted a slogan some years ago, you know: Think globally but act locally. If you only think globally about pollution, it is overwhelming; but if it is just a matter of recycling your tin cans to chip in and help, then you have something concrete to do; and certainly, in probably all the places where we live, and all the places where the Church finds itself, there are issues that we can find out about.

I like, too, what you and Dave, Kristen, were saying earlier about putting a name with it. Some years ago I was on a study committee for my denomination on the migration of workers since we dealt with illegal immigrants, and it is interesting how the conversation shifts. If you just talk about illegal immigrants as a group, people kind of draw some hard lines and they have certain opinions; but then if it is just about, you know, the Luis family, who has been in our church for years, well they are here illegally, but they are different. We want to take good care of them. Well, that is because you have a name and a face with them, and it is not just a category anymore; and that makes all the difference; and of course, Jesus was always personal, right? He didn't do things, you know, by remote. He was always touching the lepers, reaching out to the prostitutes, touching the outcasts in a very, very personal way; and that sets the tone for us.

Kristen Deede

## **JOHNSON**

One of the things I most appreciated learning through writing this book was a deeper understanding of holiness. That technically means set apart; and yet, when that word is used it almost always is in connection to God drawing near. So Jesus is the embodiment of holiness; we would all say that, and what did Jesus do? He left the purity of heaven and entered into this broken world, and every moment of interaction...not every, but almost every interaction he touches the leper, he enters into the brokenness, he sits with the prostitutes. He is always drawing near, and we as God's people are called to be holy, to be set apart by our love, justice, and righteousness.

## **DAVE BAST**

But also, then, to draw near, maybe.

Kristen Deede

## **JOHNSON**

Yes; to draw near. So, yes, set apart by drawing near.

## **SCOTT HOEZEE**

That was the number one argument Jesus had with the Pharisees in his day. For the Pharisees, being holy meant staying as far away as possible from those who would contaminate you; whereas, for Jesus, being holy meant getting as close as you can; and for Jesus, he didn't get contaminated by other people's unholiness; they got a good contamination from his holiness. It went the other way with Jesus. He didn't become unclean by touching those the Pharisees regarded as unclean. They became clean as a result of his touch.

## **DAVE BAST**

We want to think about a few more practical things. We talked about an organization; about the idea of getting information. There are a lot of great suggestions in the book, but also what can the Church do as the Church, not just we as individuals? That is what we will talk about next.

*Segment 2*

## **SCOTT HOEZEE**

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

## **DAVE BAST**

And along with our guest, Kristen Johnson, I am Dave Bast.

## **SCOTT HOEZEE**

And we are wrapping up our four-part series on justice, and we want to get really practical; Chapter 6 in your book, Kristen...your and Bethany's book...is called: *Be Sanctified and Sent: Justice and the Church*; and sometimes there is a little pushback in the Church, or some resistance to getting too involved in some of these issues; and we can talk a little bit about that; but maybe just talk a little bit about that chapter: *Be Sanctified and Sent*; you know, any scripture passages or anything that really led you and Bethany to bring into that chapter and to that whole idea, which is kind of where the book lands.

Kristen Deede

## **JOHNSON**

The overall framework of the book is walk into the biblical story; and this would be kind of where we are now. We are the Church. What is it that we are called to do now in light of this bigger view we've gotten of God's deep passion for justice and righteousness and God's desire for his people to care as deeply? One of the stories we open with is actually about John Newton. People know him as the writer of *Amazing Grace*...

## **DAVE BAST**

The great evangelical hero, yes.

Kristen Deede

## **JOHNSON**

That is right; and people love and sing *Amazing Grace*, but what they don't always put together is that he was a human trafficker when he wrote that song. There are a lot of mythic stories about him; that he had a conversion experience on a slave ship, and sometimes people think he immediately left the slave trade; but it took a long time for him to connect his faith to how he treated slaves and to his work. So, we talk a little bit about his journey, and his eventually coming to see that he needed to fight against slavery, and joining and mentoring William Wilberforce; and take some...in a way, discouragement from that, but also some encouragement that God has us on a journey; that the Spirit is sanctifying us. So if you are in a place where you are discouraged about your own involvement or you are discouraged about your church or the world, God is not done; God is still at work and can draw us to care more and more about the things of God.

## **SCOTT HOEZEE**

Well, and that story about John Newton...the truth is, that was a little news to me when I read the book. I had sort of also come to believe: Oh, he was converted and instantly changed his every way...

## **DAVE BAST**

Set all the slaves free, turned the ship around...

## **SCOTT HOEZEE**

All in the same day; but no; it took a long time; and right, there is something discouraging about that, but encouraging; but it is not so different from even what we see in the New Testament. I mean, Paul and James and Peter were writing to people where...and you think about Paul's Corinthian letters in particular, or you think of the hard things James said to the people he wrote to; it kind of came up again and again: You guys are still doing this stuff? You are still having trouble with the Lords' Supper there in Corinth? You are still showing deferential treatment to the rich when they show up and worship, as James said. It takes a while. The Spirit is constantly leading us along.

## **DAVE BAST**

Perhaps most alarming of all, Paul rebuking Peter to his face, as he says in Galatians 2, for not getting it that Gentiles are fully accepted in Christ. It sometimes takes a long time for the Gospel to sink in and break through our cultural prejudices and taboos.

So, you write in this chapter: We have to ask what has kept the Church from faithfully responding to this call for justice? What has?

Kristen Deede

## **JOHNSON**

Scott mentioned on a previous program this divide that arose in the late 1800s, early 1900s around the rise of the social gospel; and that is a big piece of the puzzle within recent American Church history. There has been a divide between Christians who care about justice and Christians who care about evangelism or saving souls. We think within the long history of the Church and within scripture that is a false division. It arose for some historic reason, those who were passionate about the social gospel trying to connect the kingdom of God to actual, physical reality. Urbanization was happening. People were suffering. They believed they connected, and so do we. They tended to de-emphasize the personal sin and the need for conversion. So in response to that, you had other Christians saying: Well, we are going to hunker down and focus on saving souls; but even historians like George Marsden and others who have studied this time period leading up to that say what we saw as some evangelicals moved away from justice can be called the great reversal. That the history, even of American Christianity was leading the way in caring about social reforms, social engagement, and that this was seen as deeply part of the Gospel, and that there were some historic reasons that led to the division, but they are not at the heart of the Gospel.

## **SCOTT HOEZEE**

Well, and what you said, Kristen, reminds me of two things. Early in the book of Acts, yes, preaching the Gospel, telling people to repent; that is really important; and the apostles were really busy with it, but so was tending to the poor; and so they created the office of deacon very early on to say: Look, somebody has to do waiting on tables, right? Somebody has to take care of the widows; and so that was an impulse early. Which is it, word or deed? And the apostles said it is both, and we'll create a whole office to do some of the deed part as well.

I am also reminded...I recently wrote a series of devotions for *Words of Hope* on Galatians, and Paul reports on this big theological conference they had on that controversy with Peter, and so forth. It was like a synod or a general assembly—big theological conversation; but before they finished they said: Oh, and now let's also turn to the ministry to the poor. And Paul said: That is exactly how I wanted it. So, theology is important, but so is tending to the poor; and that is all through the New Testament.

Kristen Deede

## **JOHNSON**

Yes; we spend a lot of time in the book of Acts in this chapter, and that really shaped our thinking. They are so closely wed, and one does not have to exclude the other; and that is, I think, some of the sad history, that these things have been divided and we are saying...

## **DAVE BAST**

It is sad, right; and it so often does happen, because the honest truth is, evangelicals in America especially turned away from this wonderful history; in the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century, evangelicals led the antislavery movement—abolitionism. Evangelicals led a movement for more rights for women. I mean, it is surprising to many, but that is what history shows.

On the other side of the coin, many of those who engaged in social ministry or the social gospel, and many today who are passionate about justice, don't seem to care very much about evangelism. So, that is kind of the tragedy of a divided church.

Kristen Deede

## **JOHNSON**

If you look at biblical righteousness, which I know you have spent time looking at along the way in this series, you cannot separate them. Biblical righteousness has to do with being ultimately in right relationship with God, and flowing from that, living in rightness in all of your other relationships. So, treating rightly each person with whom you interact. So, the restoration with God is essential, and that should lead to us caring about how others live. So, they are held together all throughout the story of scripture; and you know, those who focus primarily on saving souls—we would say: Yes; and they are saved into the family of God and saved into the kingdom of God, as Ephesians has it. These go together. We are children of God, and that is being part of this kingdom and that is part of this world. That is another reason why some of these divisions have arisen, is that Christianity has from the very beginning struggled with how to hold the spiritual and the physical realms together; and what does it look like to really care about these both; and books like the Gospel of John try to say: Actually, Jesus came into the flesh. He cares about this world, too. He reconciled all things, including the physical; so we as Christians can and should care about the things of this earth. Bethany had a great line in here about this divide between the spiritual and the physical is like evangelizing someone who is in a brothel, and then leaving her there. You know, we are called to care both about her wholeness, her shalom, her flourishing, and her soul.

## **SCOTT HOEZEE**

In my tradition, too, I have often heard those who define the Church as institute and the Church as organism; and some say: Well, the institutional Church—you know, a denominational headquarters, or whatever—has no business getting mixed up with politics or social programs. That is the Church as organism that individual believers do. I myself have never been totally sold on that division. I mean, I think that if we as individual believers are supposed to live as Christ's disciples, which would mean advocating for justice and for the poor and for those who are in terrible situations, then certainly when all of those individuals are together as the corporate Church, it should be there as well, part of the preaching and teaching life of the Church; because in both, even if you go with Church as institute and Church as organism, it is the same Jesus over both; and so, right; neat and fast separations and distinctions here maybe don't work.

Kristen Deede

## **JOHNSON**

I think that another piece that I learned a lot about was that discipleship and missions don't need to be separate. You don't need your sort of mission committee and then your discipleship arm of the Church; that our call as disciples is to live as the people of God, and God has always wanted his people, from Genesis onward, to seek justice and righteousness, and that is the manifestation of our love. So, this has to be a part of each of our lives in some way; in each of our churches as well

## **DAVE BAST**

One of the things that I found kind of striking was the story you told in the book about what would Jesus do—the old WWJD bracelet? How you sort of appreciated that, but then moved beyond it to something a little richer and fuller. Talk about that a little bit.

Kristen Deede

## **JOHNSON**

So, that was a big movement when I was in youth group, and we got the bracelets, and we actually read *In His Steps*, which was the book that it came from; and for a while it seemed helpful, but I think that I mentioned on the last program, way back when I first started thinking about justice, reading the book of Isaiah, I got this sense from that book that God's love for justice and righteousness flows from God himself; that it is part of his character; and therefore, it is supposed to be part of what we care about as well; and that to me is a richer picture of why we care than simply looking at Jesus as a model. We cannot do it. You know, the obstacles are too great. The darkness, although Christ overcomes it, is still there. On our own, we cannot do it; and having an example won't get us very far. We actually need to be adopted into God's family, receive the justice and righteousness of God, and then we can do it. So, in other words, we are not just seeking it, we actually have been given the gift of righteousness in Christ, and we need that to be able to live seeking righteousness and justice in this world.

## **SCOTT HOEZEE**

And that is exactly Paul's point in the letter to the Galatians, at the very end in Galatians 6:9: Let us not become weary in doing good; for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. <sup>10</sup>Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people; especially to those who belong to the family of believers.

## **DAVE BAST**

Yes, do good to all

## **SCOTT HOEZEE**

So, we take care of the Church, but we do good to *all* people as we have opportunity; and I think one of the things, Kristen, that you and Bethany bring out in the book is that we do have opportunity. It is all around us. There is so much suffering; so much hurt; so many examples of modern-day equivalent of the widow, the orphan, the stranger; and if we look for those opportunities we will see them, and we will not grow weary in doing good.

## **DAVE BAST**

*The Justice Calling* by Bethany Hanke Hoang and Kristen Deede Johnson; and thanks, Kristen, for joining us on *Groundwork*.

Thank you, too, for joining this conversation. We are your hosts, Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee. We would like to know how we can help you continue digging deeper into scripture. So visit [groundworkonline.com](http://groundworkonline.com) and tell us.

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