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Can Christianity Be Reduced to Love Seeking Justice?

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Moses leading the Israelites out of Egypt, József Molnár

The Bible is filled to the brim with stories, wisdom, and prophecies of God's liberating energies. One of the founding and establishing moments of Israel was God's act to free them from slavery and oppression in Egypt. This event is inaugurated when God sees his people's misery and hears them crying out. The God of the Hebrews is an attentive God, a God who responds to suffering. And it is this attentiveness that he summons his elected people too.

The event of the exodus is etched into the memory of Israel and makes its mark throughout the Old Testament. It is established at the outset of the Ten Commandments, prefacing the law given to Israel as a mark of their covenant relationship with God: "Remember the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt". The law itself is filled with concern for the suffering; "care for the widow, the orphan, and the stranger", God says, "proclaim a year of jubilee". It is present in the Psalms, the songbook of Israel, as a call to remember God's faithfulness in raising Israel from Egypt. The prophets, too, claim that Israel was not faithful to God and they expressed this unfaithfulness by oppressing the poor and the land, ignoring God's call to be a light to the nations and establish a kingdom of love and justice; Israel forgot God's act of liberation, and established themselves as oppressors and idolaters, for which the justice of God brought them to exile.

In the New Testament Jesus is the fulfilment and culmination of the justice of God. He comes to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour, and to preach that "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:21). He preaches and ushers in the Kingdom of God, calling tax collectors, prostitutes, and all manner of sinners to follow him in a disruption of the established social order built around the *pax Romana*, the "peace" of Rome established and maintained at the tip of a sword. God's love in Jesus unsettles everything. "Blessed are you who are poor," we read (Luke 6:20). The Apostle Paul describes equality and unity between

opposites in Christ: no Jew and Greek, no slave and free, no male and female, but a universal equality of love and justice established in God's promise through Jesus. So then what are we to make of all this, this major theme in the Bible of God's love and justice, of his action in the world, and his commands and invitations that his chosen people participate in that love and justice? Is that the heart of the Christian message? It has been said, rightly so, that cutting every passage about justice from the Bible would leave a rather tattered and flimsy volume. The pursuit of justice through love is a massively central message of the Holy Scriptures.

But are the scriptures and the Christian traditions *reducible* to such a message? There are certain circles of Christianity where it may seem so. If you're disappointed or frustrated with an individualistic, self-centered, and emotionally-based Christianity, where else is there to turn but the proclamation and action of love and justice? And in our contemporary climate influenced by scientific truth, skepticism, and cynicism towards traditional Christian beliefs and practices, doesn't it simply make sense to reduce the message of Christianity to one of love and justice? Shouldn't Christianity adapt to the current day and age by working out and practicing its ethical principles only and forgetting about spirituality, transcendence, or other things of the past? Consider the title of Gretta Vosper's 2009 book, *With or Without God: Why the Way We Live is More Important than What We Believe*, and you'll get a sense of the questions I'm asking.

Christianity, though, needs to maintain the importance of prayer, spirituality, worship, and other aspects of the Christian life that may seem superfluous to the pursuit of love and justice. *It is only in maintaining them that love and justice be pursued with any Christian integrity.* Christianity should never let itself be separated from the pursuit of love and justice but it also should never let itself be reduced to an ethical system, whether individualistic sexual ethics on the one hand or public-justice ethics on the other. On both sides of this spectrum is the assumption that Christianity is an ethical system; the only disagreement is on what that ethical system consists of, which ethical propositions are held to be true.

What is the alternative proposal? How can Christianity simultaneously never let go of acts of love and justice while at the same time never reducing Christianity to them? The answer has to do directly with Christ: "Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed" (Luke 5:16). There is no attempt to be self-dependent in Jesus; he constantly grounds and reminds himself of his Father in heaven, who is a mystery of boundless love and justice, a mystery which cannot be grasped, never fully captured in thought or in deed. In Philippians we read that Jesus embraced this very ungraspable mystery, he "who did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant" (Philippians 2:6-7).



Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, Pedro Berruguete

As imitators of him, we are summoned, called, invited, to do the same, to take on the very nature of a servant. But we do so in recognition of our dependence on God. What flows from this is a passionate concern for love and justice, for the poor and oppressed in our world. But it is a manifestly non-judgemental, non-patronizing, and non-superior pursuit of justice, particularly in confronting those with whom we disagree on what God's reign manifests itself as. It is of course passionate, convinced, and energized by the life of God at work within it. But instead of being a source

of pride, this pursuit of justice will spring from a source of grace, that is, God's desire to make his life known through you through communion and union.

Our imitation of Christ continues unto glorification: "God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name.... Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Philippians 2:9, 11). We are invited into Jesus' relationship with God, such that we cry out "Abba, Father!" Through Jesus, the firstborn of the new creation, we are born unto a new creation and participate in God's dwelling in all things. Our acts of love and justice are real instances of the God's life already here and God's life still to come, as are our acts of prayer, worship, and silence. We are not proud or self-aggrandizing; instead, we are joyful, filled with the authentic joy that comes from God making his home in us so that we become increasingly and infinitely more like him in whom the "fullness of God was pleased to dwell." Not a reduction to ethics, but an elevation of ethics to the very life of God into which all creation is summoned.

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