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This dissertation is dedicated to the people of Christ Community Church in Oklahoma City: my friends, family, and co-conspirators in the peaceable kingdom of God.

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Abstract

This dissertation intervenes in political theology to offer a constructive and wide-ranging theological proposal for Christian cultural engagement and peacemaking in the context of the globalization, perpetual violence, widespread economic inequity, and religious pluralism that characterize geopolitics in the twenty-first century. Drawing upon the biblical concept of *shalom*, it argues that the church's peacemaking vocation involves not only mediating conflict, but also pursuing human flourishing at the local, national, and international levels. The dissertation engages with influential classic and contemporary texts of Christian theology as well as the work of leading secular cultural theorists in order to reassess the meaning of three major concepts—evil, justice, and love—that are central for any coherent vision of Christian political praxis. Building upon this analysis, it advocates for the spiritual disciplines of lament and “prophetic imagination,” whereby the church learns to name the world's evils while also cultivating new visions of human flourishing that can guide and sustain social action. In order to flesh out the principles and tactics of the church's peacemaking mission, the dissertation also analyzes the thought and action of exemplary modern peace activists, notably Martin Luther King Jr., John M. Perkins, Desmond Tutu, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. The central argument is that the church is called to resist evil and cultivate *shalom* in the present world order through counter-cultural love, which is expressed by (1) radical practices of reconciliation across demographic barriers, (2) assets-based development strategies aimed at promoting comprehensive flourishing in under-

resourced communities, and (3) nonviolent direct action that challenges injustice at the structural level while promoting a biblically-rooted vision of human solidarity.

Keywords: political theology, peacemaking, lament, prophetic imagination, assets-based community development, nonviolent resistance, evil, justice, love

1. Introduction: Sowing Shalom

1.1. Peace and Power

Disciples of Jesus are peacemakers (Matt. 5:9; Jam. 3:13-18). Though this principle is clear enough, it raises the question of how the church is supposed to go about its peace-making mission in the world, which is a question about power. The scriptures never invite the Christian community to muster financial, military, or political strength and bend the world to its will. In fact, whenever this community attempts to exert its will in a way that is recognizable to the world as power, it is already failing to confess its faith in the crucified and risen Christ. Paul declares: “Though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh” (2 Cor. 10:3-5).¹ History is sadly replete with examples of the church’s failure to heed these words. Christians have shed much blood in the name of God’s kingdom from the time Peter drew his sword in Gethsemane to the present, but such attempts to usher in Christ’s reign of peace through violence are a betrayal of Christian mission.

This is not to say, however, that the church is without power. Christ’s disciples make peace in the world through a power that is cruciform, a power that is manifest in self-giving love. The way of the church, like the word of the cross, can only appear as folly and weakness to the world (1 Cor. 1:18-31). But hidden beneath this weakness is a potent life that threatens all worldly powers, “For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men” (1 Cor. 1:25). The church’s way of making peace is a Spirit-empowered imitation of Christ, who reveals the manner of his

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version.

kingdom's coming with the words: "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (Jn. 12:24). Christ sows his own life in order that God may bring forth a harvest of peace, and he calls his disciples to imitate this model of dying to self so that others may live (Jn. 12:25; cf. 2 Cor. 4:11-12; 1 Jn. 3:16). Thus, the church makes peace by offering its own life as a gift to the world. It follows Jesus on the path of love, a path of death that leads to resurrection.

But "love" is not a term with a self-evident meaning, and many inadequate understandings of love have become tools of social control that ideologically undergird an unjust status quo. For Christians to "hold fast to love and justice" (Hos. 12:6), these two concepts must be understood as partners rather than competitors. Thus, it is important to think clearly and carefully about the meaning of both justice and love. Moreover, "love" in the abstract—even if well-defined—cannot be wielded as a peaceful weapon of redemptive power unless it is embodied in concrete practices that fit the needs of particular situations. Resisting evil in the cruciform way of God's kingdom requires not only faith and fortitude, but also wisdom and creativity. In order to be just, love needs wise tactics. Thus, the ideal of peacemaking cannot become more than an ideal unless the church fulfills its commission to make disciples (Matt. 28:28-29) in a way that trains Christians in concrete habits, skills, and practices of resistance to powers and principalities of the present evil age (Eph. 4:11-12; 6:10-12).

This dissertation is an effort to think about the theological roots of Christian peacemaking as well as the tactics of love and justice that the church of Jesus Christ should employ in our time. My driving question is: How does God call the church to

faithfully express its identity as God’s peacemaking children—to wisely wield its power of redemptive love and justice—in the midst of the chaos and violence of the twenty-first century? This question falls under the rubric of what is now called “political theology,” and it is a pressing question not only for Christians, but for all humans in our time. The present fault lines of global violence, which continually threaten to unleash earth-shaking catastrophes that could easily surpass the worst bloodshed of the twentieth century, are drawn mostly between nation states controlled by the ideologies of secular capitalism, secular communism, and various forms of Islam. Meanwhile, the Christian church, having grown exponentially over the last two centuries, now comprises roughly one-third of the human population and is a multi-ethnic community, dispersed throughout the world, with no clear center of gravity. What the scattered, disaggregated community of Christ’s followers think and do about their claim to bear the gospel of peace should be a matter of universal interest in such a time as this.

The church’s current position within the world is without historical precedent. Despite persistent talk about the “death of God” among contemporary cultural theorists, the fact is that the Christian church is larger—both in terms of total numbers and percentage of the global population—than it has ever been before. Nearly half of the total Christian believers in the religion’s two-thousand-year history are alive right now (Noll 21), and these 2.2 billion individuals comprise a third of the global population (Pew). These figures are largely the result of the rapid growth of Christianity in the global south and east over the last century, which has also brought about massive shifts in the demographic makeup of this global religion. For example, while in 1910 more than eighty percent of professing Christians lived in Europe and North America, less

than forty percent do so today (Noll 81). But paradoxically, Christians may possess less political power on the global stage than they have in a thousand years. Western Christendom has died, and—despite its size and global presence—the church occupies a seat of authority in none of the world’s major nation states or trans-national powers. This unprecedented situation is concurrent with the phenomenon of equally unprecedented globalization through communication and transportation technologies, massive human migration, and transnational capitalism. In such a situation, the world’s powers inevitably feel a pressing need to figure out what to do with the church, even as the church has a pressing need to discern how it should live in relation to the new world powers.

It is increasingly difficult for anyone interested in the future of humanity to ignore the importance of religion in global politics, and those secular thinkers who still believe that asking people to check their religious identities at the door is a good way to pursue peaceful pluralism are losing credibility with the dawn of each new day. This is an hour for direct, respectful, forthright conversation across the lines of various religions and secularisms. Thankfully, such conversation is already underway. Over the last several decades, there have been two distinct turns towards theology within secular cultural theory. The first of these, which is mostly associated with thinkers in the poststructuralist tradition—notably Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, and Jacques Lacan—began in the latter decades of the twentieth century and, with a few notable exceptions, took an agonistic stance towards Christianity. In turning to theology, the project of these theorists has usually been to interrogate the church and its theology, and to subject the Christian residue of Western culture to critical analysis. The

second turn towards theology, which is mostly associated with the Marxist tradition, began around the turn of the twenty-first century (with important precursors) and shows signs of being more constructive. Thinkers in this tradition—such as Alain Badiou, Terry Eagleton, and Slavoj Žižek—have tended to engage living theologians in direct dialogue and to argue (despite their persistent atheism) that Christian theology possesses resources which secular theory lacks, both for criticizing the hegemony of oppressive global powers and for conceptually grounding the work of resisting these powers in pursuit of a better world. Moreover, this turn of secular cultural theorists towards theology is mirrored by a turn of contemporary Christian thinkers towards doing political theology in a way that directly engages leading secular theorists. Of this trend, Stanley Hauerwas, Emmanuel Katongole, John Milbank, James K.A. Smith, and Miroslav Volf are all exemplary. It is my conviction that we need more of this constructive dialogue, and we need such conversations to take place in a way that builds bridges between the academy and the general public, where Christians, Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, and secularists do most of their fighting and collaborating.

In keeping with this conviction, my dissertation is an example of Christian theologizing in the public square. Of course, this kind of public theology has plenty of critics among secularists and Christians alike. Even among those secularists who do not share the conviction of Christopher Hitchens that religion “poisons everything,” there are nonetheless many who share Richard Rorty’s concern that bringing religion into public, political conversations in a secular state always functions as a “conversation-stopper.”² However, there are many good reasons for moving beyond this idea. For

² See Hitchens’ *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* and Rorty’s “Religion as Conversation-stopper” in *Philosophy and Social Hope*, 168-174.

starters, it is important to recognize that there is no such thing as a values-free, ideologically-neutral position from which to conduct public debate. Thus, principled pluralism in which people with different standpoints listen to one another and work to find points of common ground is the only way to do democracy in a world with ever-fewer pockets of cultural homogeneity. Moreover, recent history yields many examples of such constructive dialog across ideological lines, such as the American Civil Rights movement, in which many Jews, Christians, secularists, and adherents of other religions rallied behind a cohort of Baptist and Methodist preachers. From a broader historical perspective, Terry Eagleton's recent *Culture and the Death of God* argues cogently that various attempts at pure secularism since the Enlightenment have repeatedly and unwittingly replaced God with God-like surrogates, and these alter-deities have not always proved benevolent. Eagleton's book concludes with the suggestion that secular cultural theorists should reconsider the politically liberating and radical potential of religions, especially Christianity. Along these same lines, theologian Miroslav Volf argues persuasively in *Flourishing: Why We Need Religion in a Globalized World* that Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism all contain the potential to exacerbate the worst tendencies towards violence and exploitation characterizing contemporary globalization, but they also have the greatest potential to evoke compelling visions of justice and peace while mobilizing and inspiring constructive social action. I concur with this judgment, and I would simply add that the adherents of these religions—who comprise more than 88 percent of the global population—are not going to leave their convictions at home when they come to the public square, regardless of what some cultural theorists might desire (Pew). If we do not learn to

embrace constructive, peaceful pluralism, then violence or ideological coercion are the most likely alternatives.

It is also important to address those Christians who may fear that biblical theology can only be contaminated by engaging the intellectual traditions of the non-Christian world, a concern famously expressed by Tertullian's question: What has Athens to do with Jerusalem? (*Presecription against Heretics* 7) However, this question was already answered in the book of Acts, which begins with Jesus telling his disciples to take his message from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). Particularly noteworthy is the account in Acts of Paul's famous speech delivered to the people of Athens assembled at the Aeropaus (Acts 17:22-34). Here we find the apostle from Jerusalem addressing the "men of Athens" directly in a way that is simultaneously constructive and critical. Paul affirms the spiritual impulses of his non-Christian interlocutors (vv. 22-23, 27) and quotes their intellectual leaders positively (v. 28), but he also calls them to a radical reorientation of life based upon the universal lordship of the resurrected Messiah (vv. 30-31). In his recent book *God in Public: Speaking God's Truth to the World's Power*, Tom Wright points out that this evangelistic address of Paul has political implications as well (2-3). After all, Paul is dragged to the Areopagus based on the charge that he is "a preacher of foreign deities" (Acts. 17:18)—an offense potentially punishable by death—and his recent experiences of imprisonment in Philippi (Acts 16:16-40) and rioting in Thessalonica (Acts 17:1-9) reveal just how politically inflammatory his gospel could be. Despite these risks, Paul does not shrink from declaring that the one creator of the world has exalted Jesus as Lord over all powers and demanded that ultimate loyalty is due to Jesus alone. The apostle from Jerusalem

affirms what is affirmable in the culture of Athens but also calls its people to a new way of life that is realigned with the universal gospel of peace. Likewise, Christians today are called to continue the risky work of listening to, learning from, building upon, criticizing, and challenging the main intellectual currents of the non-Christian world. To elaborate this point, it is necessary to offer some reflections on scripture's teaching about the nature of the church and its mission.

1.2. The Church and the Peace of God

The church on earth is a sign of God's peace in the midst of the world's chaos. This is not primarily a statement about what the church does or should do; it is a statement about what the church is. To be the church is to be the community that confesses its complicity in the worst of the world's violence and then proceeds to confess, somewhat audaciously, "Christ himself is our peace" (Eph. 2:14). According to the Christian Gospel, Jesus is the gift of the peace-making God—the gift of God's self to his enemies—and this gift is received by entrusting oneself to the God who gives it. The church hears the words of Christ, "my peace I give to you" (Jn. 14:27), and then testifies that it has received Christ's gift by declaring: "since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. . . . For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly" (Rom. 5:1, 6). This declaration of faith in Christ—which the church makes through its preaching, its sacraments, its life of disciplined fellowship, and its works of love—is what makes the invisible church visible on earth. Moreover, to confess Christ is to demonstrate that God's Spirit is present and active within the confessing community: "No one can say 'Jesus is Lord'

except in the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:3). The church’s confession reveals that the Spirit has incorporated those who make it into the body of the crucified and risen Messiah (1 Cor. 12:12-14; Rom. 6:1-4; Gal. 2:20), which means also that Christ’s presence in the world is manifest here, within the communion of the confessing church, for this community “is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all” (Eph. 1:22-23). The Spirit of peace makes Christ’s fullness present in and through the fellowship of his disciples.

The mission of the church is an expression of this identity as the body of Christ and the sign of God’s peace on earth. Its whole communal life is a response to Paul’s exhortation: “Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace” (Col. 3:15). Its preaching is the “good news of peace through Jesus Christ” (Acts 10:36). Its work in the world is shaped by the beatitude of Jesus: “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God” (Matt. 5:9). As a sign of God’s peace, the church is also the embodiment of the thing signified—the cutting edge of God’s work to renew creation—and its mission is a sub-creational participation in God’s *creatio continua*, the cultivation of God’s peace on earth.

To use a biblical metaphor, the church participates in God’s redemptive work by sowing seeds of *shalom*. This Hebrew word—which is translated “peace,” “health,” “safety,” “prosperity,” and “well-being” in various contexts—signifies the comprehensive flourishing of creation. Where *shalom* is present, every part of God’s creation thrives in its own freedom and yet is bound to every other part of creation, and to the Creator, in a covenant of mutual love. In Zechariah 8:12, God promises to sow *shalom* among the exiled people of Israel. The surrounding context makes it clear that

this involves a restoration of God's presence with his people (v. 3), an end to poverty and violence (vv. 10-11), and the drawing of many nations to God (vv. 20-21). Moreover, in verses 16 and 19, God tells his people to "render...judgments that are true and make for *shalom*" and to "love truth and *shalom*." God's act of sowing peace among his people calls forth a lifestyle that loves and lives according to the principles of peace. In the subsequent chapter, Zechariah 9:9-11 declares that all of this will take place as a Davidic king humbly enters Zion, speaks "*shalom* to the nations," and establishes a universal reign grounded upon "the blood of [God's] covenant," whereby the king will set "prisoners free from the bottomless pit." Matthew 21:4-5 declares this prophecy to be fulfilled when Jesus rides into Jerusalem on a donkey, and James 3:18 describes disciples of Jesus who walk in the Spirit's wisdom in these terms: "Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness." This allusion to Zechariah 8:12 suggest that those in whose hearts Christ has sown *shalom* are called to respond by sowing *shalom* in the world. The church is an agent of change, called to plant the peace of God in a violent world.

1.3. Speaking from the Church

At this point, it should be clear that my engagement with leading secular cultural theorists is carried out explicitly from the position of one who identifies with Christ and his church. In fact, it is my contention that the social location of the Christian theologian is, necessarily and essentially, the church. Theologians may hold academic positions, but it is only as a member of the suffering, struggling, worshipping, sinning, and repenting communion of saints that a theologian may be called "Christian." One

reason for this is that God is pleased to make foolish those who are too concerned to be considered wise by the world: “Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?” (1 Cor. 1:20). Christian theologians must be content to identify themselves with the folly of Christ’s cross and his church, for “God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God” (1 Cor. 28-29). Christian theology is the business of the Christian church—with all of its folly, failure, and sin—for only here is the power of resurrection hidden beneath the weakness of the cross.

This point is demonstrated by two twentieth-century pastor-theologians—Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Luther King Jr.—who were both concerned with the question of how the church wields power to make peace in the world.³ In a lecture delivered late in the year 1935 to his students at the illegal Finkenwald seminary—created to train pastors who would lead the German “Confessing Church” in its resistances to Nazi power—Bonhoeffer asked, “Does the church of the Word of God have a place in the world, and if so, what is the nature of this place?” (“Visible” 153). Bonhoeffer was concerned to ward off two heretical tendencies. The first was a docetic ecclesiology and eschatology, influenced by German idealism, that could think of the church only as a disembodied entity, with no claim to a place in the world. The opposite heresy was a “secular ecclesiology,” influenced by modern materialism, that tended

³ The best account of Bonhoeffer’s life remains Ebehard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography*. For a compelling and meticulously well-researched narrative of King’s life during the years of Civil Rights leadership, see Taylor Branch’s trilogy: *Parting the Waters : America in the King Years, 1954-63*; *Pillar of Fire : America in the King Years, 1963-65*; and *At Canaan's Edge: America in the King Years, 1965-68*. Troy Jackson’s *Becoming King: Martin Luther King Jr. and the Making of a National Leader* is highly valuable for the way that Jackson foregrounds the role of King’s congregation, family, and friends in shaping his life.

towards a “magical attitude towards the sacrament” and an unchristian conception of the church’s power in the world. In a German context in which the church was capitulating to both of these errors—either seeking to seize secular power through participation with the Nazi state or to withdraw from the work of challenging the world’s violent power—Bonhoeffer saw clearly that the local congregation, not the academic faculties, would be the place where Christian theology could genuinely take place. He writes:

The church struggle has been carried on by pastors and parishes, not by university theologians. The reason for this is that it has been the pastors and the parishes, not the faculties, who have realized the question of the place of the church. Theology and the question of the church stem from the empirical experiences of the church in its encounters. The church suffers blows and recognizes that the body of the church is pursuing its way in the world. (154)

Since Bonhoeffer was an academic as well as a pastor, it is clear that he is not denying a place for Christian theologians in the universities and seminaries. However, he argues that the place of identification—the social location from which theologians do their work—must always be the church. The struggles of the local congregation to live faithfully in the world are the furnace in which theological wisdom is forged.

Three decades later, Martin Luther King Jr. would make similar points as he wrote and edited a collection of sermons called *Strength to Love* while spending two weeks in jail for leading a nonviolent prayer vigil in Albany, Georgia. Like Bonhoeffer, King was trying to think about how the church can make real peace in the world without conforming to the world’s corrupt abuses of power, and he was doing so while suffering as an enemy of the state. In a sermon called “Transformed Nonconformist,” based on Romans 12:2, King writes: “Every Christian is a citizen of two worlds, the world of time and the world of eternity” (12). He goes on to reflect upon Paul’s metaphor of the church as a colony of heaven, developed in the epistle to the Philippians, and King

concludes that “the Apostle does point out the responsibility of Christians to imbue an unchristian world with the ideals of a higher and more noble order. Living in the colony of time, we are ultimately responsible to the empire of eternity” (12). This metaphor involves the church in the work of challenging the destructive cultural patterns of hate and violence for the good of the world, while giving “supreme loyalty” only to “God and his kingdom of love” (12). Elsewhere in this volume, King makes it clear that such ideals only became real to him when he consciously entered into the struggles of the suffering church.

As the son of a wealthy and powerful pastor, King admits that he never really suffered until he and his wife Coretta chose to turn down offers of church and university positions in the North because they sensed a divine calling to enter the struggles of blacks in the South (116). The resulting experience of suffering with the people of God in Montgomery, Alabama had a transformative effect on King’s theology and spirituality. He was quickly plunged into the struggle for desegregation and human dignity, which led to years of uninterrupted difficulty. From his Albany cell, he writes: “I have been imprisoned in Alabama and Georgia jails twelve times. My home has been bombed twice. A day seldom passes that my family and I are not the recipients of threats of death. I have been the victim of near fatal stabbing” (162). These are the kinds of experiences that Bonhoeffer describes as the church “suffering blows,” and so coming to discover its identity and its “way in the world.” King’s testimony confirms Bonhoeffer’s theory. He writes that suffering led him to discover for the first time what it means to experience communion with the “living God” who is “responsive to the deepest yearning of the human heart” and who “both evokes and answers prayer” (163).

Moreover, suffering in the concrete struggles of the church to make peace lead King to a new understanding of the power that is latent in cruciform love. He writes: “There are some who still find the cross a stumbling block, others consider it foolishness, but I am more convinced than ever before that it is the power of God unto social and individual salvation” (162). Like Bonhoeffer, it was King’s identification with the suffering Christ and his church in its concrete struggles that ultimately lead him to think seriously about the church’s way of making peace in the world.

It is worth noting that Bonhoeffer and King, who were preeminently theologians of the church, are also among the most important modern exemplars of prophetic theology that enters into creative and constructive dialogue with non-Christian thinkers. They both confessed personal faith in a personal God; they both filled their texts with biblical theology; they both identified primarily with the church; and yet, they both were public intellectuals who exerted broad influence outside of their own religious communities. This reality, which is exemplified also by Civil Rights leaders, such as John M. Perkins and Desmond Tutu, gives me good hope that genuine dialogue between “churchly” Christian theology and secular culture is possible and has the potential to be mutually constructive. This is important because, on the one hand, theology that does not speak *from* the church is inevitably disconnected from the pain, hope, and spiritual energy of the Christian community. But, on the other hand, theology that does not speak *to* the world becomes an insular game that is disconnected from the church’s essential vocation to sow *shalom*. Theology is a ministry of public proclamation, an aspect of the church’s mission to participate with God in the renewal of all creation.

1.4. Theological Method

In our postmodern era of epistemological angst, theology has sometimes become so obsessed with examining its own methodological presuppositions that it never gets around to saying much about God, Christ, grace, the church, the world, or the life of discipleship. I am both eager to avoid this trap of perpetual prolegomena and convinced that the best way to discover, test, and refine theological methodologies is usually to put them to work on their proper task. Nonetheless, it is worth pausing to clarify my method of argumentation and to offer some apologia for the eclectic ensemble of thinkers and texts with whom this dissertation enters into dialogue.

Theology, most basically, is “talk about God.” In this sense, the cliché that “everyone is a theologian” is more-or-less correct, because few people can manage completely to avoid talking about God, even if their talk is mostly about disbelieving or disapproving what others say. Christian theology, however, begins with faith in Christ and then proceeds, according to the famous formula of Augustine and Anselm, as “faith seeking understanding.” This description already makes it apparent that theology begins, as it were, in the middle, because the meaning of “faith” is among the matters that theology seeks to understand. The attempt to do away with this problem fails to take into account the historical situated-ness of all theologizing. As Alistair McGrath puts it, “The history of Jesus of Nazareth is the precipitating event of Christian theology” (*Genesis of Doctrine* 1). Moreover, this history of Jesus comes to people in the present through its historical transmission in and by the church, even if the church is only present as the invisible discernor, preserver, translator, and distributor of sacred

scripture. Thus, from a phenomenological perspective, Christian theology always begins with hearing Christ preached (one way or another) by the church, confessing faith in this Christ, and then moving on to discern more fully the meaning of Christ, faith, and confession. To put this in more properly theological terms: Theology begins with an encounter, initiated by Christ, who graciously presents himself in word, sacrament, and Christian community, and then calls for a response of understanding faith.

For the purposes of this dissertation, I suggest the following tentative definition: The work of Christian theology takes place when disciples of Jesus in a particular time and place faithfully hear and respond to the word of God, in dependence upon the Holy Spirit, and in conscious communion with the church throughout the ages and the nations. Since this sentence contains the methodology driving my dissertation, I will take a moment to elaborate upon its parts:

Christian theology happens when disciples of Jesus hear and respond to the word of God.

Jesus identifies his disciples as those who abide in his words, and the church hears all the words of both testaments as the words of Christ. To receive the scriptures as such is not dependent upon any particular theory about the ways through which God has “breathed out” his word, but merely to confess that God has done so (2 Tim. 3:14-17; cf. Heb. 12:1-2; 2 Pet. 1:21). The church heeds the words of scripture because in the scriptures the church finds Christ. Conversely, it is precisely in hearing and heeding the word of Christ that the church becomes itself, the sign of God’s peace within the world’s brokenness. When the church ceases to find its identity through faith in the

word of God, it loses both Christ and itself. It also loses all potency as a prophetic, peace-making community. But when a community of disciples receives the scriptures as God's authoritative words of life, which he has sent to renew creation's peace, then this community can become a channel of God's redemptive work in the world.

Christ's disciples hear and respond to God's word in dependence upon God's Spirit.

To hear and heed God's words is a gift of divine grace. Paul teaches that only the Spirit of God can free the church to behold Christ in the scriptures (1 Cor. 2:6-16; 2 Cor. 3:12-18). The church confesses its dependence upon this gracious work of the Spirit when it makes the songs of Isaiah's suffering servant its own (cf. Isaiah 42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; 52:13-53:12). Though many Christians have interpreted these songs to be straightforward Messianic predictions, I prefer to read them as descriptions of a persona—the faithful servant of the Lord—that is imperfectly embodied by Israel and its spiritual leaders but perfectly fulfilled by Christ. For the Messianic community—the church of Christ—this persona becomes paradigmatic.⁴ In Isaiah 50, the servant of the Lord sings of his ability to speak life-giving words to the downtrodden because he has been enabled by divine grace to hear and heed the life-giving words of God in the posture of a disciple:

The Lord God has given me the tongue of disciples,
That I may know how to sustain the weary one with a word.
He awakens me morning by morning,

⁴ The question of hermeneutical approaches to the suffering servant of Isaiah is a massive one with an equally massive scholarly literature. For a very concise but nuanced approach to the persona of God's faithful servant within the larger theological matrices of Isaiah from a Christian perspective with which I am sympathetic, see Willem VanGemeren, "Isaiah" in *A Biblical-Theological Introduction to the Old Testament*, ed. Miles V. Van Pelt. For an introduction to this complex issue from a variety of approaches by pre-Christian, Jewish, and Christian biblical interpreters, see *The Suffering Servant: Isaiah 53 in Jewish and Christian Sources*, eds. Peter Stuhlmacher and Bernd Janowski.

He awakens my ear to listen as a disciple.
The Lord God has opened my ear (Isa. 50:3-4)

This ability to “listen as a disciple” to the word of God is a gift. By grace, God awakens the ears of his servants to hear his words and be trained by them. This ability “to listen as a disciple” carries with it the ability to speak with power, the gift of “the tongue of disciples,” which has the power to “sustain the weary one with a word.” Theology that is life-giving is the fruit of hearing God’s word with ears that have been opened by God’s grace.

Moreover, the gift of hearing and heeding God’s word carries with it not only the power for redemptive speech, but also the capacity for faithful living in the midst of struggle and pain. To “listen as a disciple” is to gain the power to follow Christ, the suffering servant of God, down his cruciform path of self-giving love. This is why Isaiah’s servant first declares “the Lord has opened my ear” and then goes on to say:

I was not disobedient
Nor did I turn back.
I gave my back to those who strike me,
And my cheeks to those who pluck out the beard;
I did not cover my face from humiliation and spitting.
For the Lord God helps me (Isa. 50:5-7)

Receiving grace to hear God’s word as a disciple entails receiving power for resilient witness in the face of suffering and humiliation because this path of self-emptying is the only path of discipleship. The words of Jesus are clear: “Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple” (Lk. 14:27). To hear this word of Christ and respond faithfully is a gift of the Spirit, and this gracious gift—which Jesus declares available to all who ask for it (Lk. 11:33)—is a prerequisite for Christian theology.

Christ's disciples hear and respond to the word of God from their position in a particular time and place.

Christian discipleship is a historically contingent phenomenon. Christians are always reading their scriptures and responding from within particular historical and cultural milieux. Some theologians act as if this situated-ness is an obstacle that must be overcome in order to do the work of theology from a perspective that is eternal, uncontaminated by social contingencies. But this is a mistake for several reasons. Since it is impossible to do theology (or anything else) from an objective standpoint outside the realm of contingent history, the attempt to do so always means self-deception—pretending to be outside culture while remaining within—which usually has the effect of making one less aware than one might have been about the degree to which cultural assumptions are shaping one's theology. More important, Christianity has at its core the convictions that God is immanent within creation, that God's Son became incarnate at a particular historical time and place, that the Spirit is drawing people to Christ from every culture, and that the consummation of God's redemptive work is not an escape from finite embodiment, but the glorification of embodied reality in the new heavens and earth. In other words, Christians do not hope for or seek an escape from finitude; rather, we work, pray, and hope for God's eternal peace to permeate and transform the finite creation, with all of its contingencies and particularities. This hope is reflected in the fact that the church receives scripture as God's words despite the fact that these scriptures are conditioned in innumerable ways by the cultural, linguistic, and historical milieu from which they emerged. The form of scripture, like its content, reveals that God is present and active within the contingencies of history. Theologians, as finite

creatures, can only find God within the messiness, pain, and particularity of the time and place in which they live.

Sometimes it is sufficient to keep this knowledge that one is doing theology from within a particular context in the back of one's mind, but in other situations it becomes necessary to bring context into the foreground. Contemporary liberation theologians have sometimes done this in an extreme way, to such a degree that contextual concerns overwhelm and drown out the word of God. When this takes place, theology can only be the servant of one ideology or another. But the Christian tradition is replete with more positive examples in which the context of theological discourse is brought to the fore. Augustine's *City of God*, which is among the most influential and enduring texts of Western theology, begins with the struggles of the church within a very particular historical moment and then moves into the work of scriptural exegesis and theological reflection from this starting point. Likewise, I have already emphasized Bonhoeffer's observation that the important theological work of his time was emerging from the contextually specific struggles of the church with destructive powers plaguing Europe in the mid-twentieth century. In fact, the highly "occasional" nature of many Pauline epistles is sufficient to demonstrate that working from the contextual struggles of a particular congregation into reflections upon scripture, God, the gospel, and the kingdom can be done in a way that has enduring significance. Though I have no illusions of being Augustine, Bonhoeffer, or Paul, I believe that my current project is one that can only be carried out in a way that brings context into the foreground. The major themes analyzed in this dissertation—evil, justice, love, and power—could easily

be considered as unreal abstractions, and their analysis could devolve into a kind of intellectual game. But this is not how I come to these themes.

I write this dissertation explicitly and self-consciously from a perspective that is formed by my role as pastor of Christ Community Church, a Baptist congregation located in an under-resourced neighborhood of southwest Oklahoma City. Thus, my concern to think clearly and carefully about evil in its social dimensions emerges not from abstract philosophical speculations, but from this congregation's collective experience of suffering due to violence, economic exploitation, racial segregation, educational inequity, sexual abuse, human trafficking, and a host of other concrete evils that we face. Likewise, my interest in themes such as justice, love, and power emerges from my participation in the congregation's collective work of responding to scripture in a way that seeks to bring restorative justice to our neighborhood with the tactics of love. The shared experience of the praying, preaching, peace-making congregation precedes, motivates, and shapes my academic work. Thus, in order to ground my conceptual argumentation in reality, this dissertation frequently moves back and forth between theoretical work and story-telling. When in the latter mode, my aim is never to present Christ Community Church or its efforts as a model of the right way to do things. Still less am I narrating a self-congratulatory success story. (Our efforts are context-specific, and our life of communal discipleship has been shaped at least as much by failure as by success.) Rather, I choose to tell stories because the concrete struggles of Christians living and laboring as a community in a particular time and place are integral to the content of my argument. To think in meaningful ways about how the Body of

Christ takes up space in the world requires not only the skeletal framework of abstract concepts but also the muscle, skin, and sinew of real world narrative.

The particularity of my social-location is also the reason why I have chosen some of the dialogue partners who repeatedly appear throughout this dissertation. Though I engage with quite a few contemporary theologians, the modern Christian thinkers to whom I most frequently turn in this dissertation are pastors and theologians of the Anglo-African tradition, especially black theologians of the American Civil Rights tradition, such as Howard Thurman, Martin Luther King Jr., and John M. Perkins. Such thinkers have shaped the preaching, pastoral theology, and communal vision of Christ Community Church in important ways, and their prophetic work of reading scripture in the light of the modern struggles of marginalized people needs to be taken more seriously by theologians than it generally is. In a certain respect, I come to these thinkers as an outsider with a desire to learn. This process of learning goes back for decades, but it intensified when I found myself—a white Christian—leading a multi-ethnic congregation and mentoring many young, black leaders. These leaders and I made an effort, not only to read the books of historic African American theologians and pastors, but also to drive around the country so that we could sit at the feet of mentors in the black church tradition. Moreover, our congregation is an intentionally multi-ethnic church with an intentionally multi-ethnic pastoral team in a tradition that Howard Thurman helped to pioneer in the 1940s, and we are active participants in the Christian Community Development Association, which was founded by John Perkins, who has been a personal encourager and counselor to us. So I approach leaders of this tradition

as a racial outsider for whom this sociological barrier does not feel nearly as strong as the deeper sense of Christian communion and solidarity.

In addition to engaging contemporary theologians, thinking theologically in my postmodern, pluralistic, twenty-first century context also leads me to interact with the writings of secular cultural theorists from the late-twentieth century to the present, especially those from the Marxist and poststructuralist traditions who deal directly with political theology. I have several reasons for doing so, and I will now add three of these to the reasons mentioned above. First, these thinkers continually raise penetrating questions that force me back to the scriptures and the resources of my own tradition in order to re-think my operating assumptions. As Miroslav Volf likes to put it, the best atheist thinkers are very good at smashing idols, which theologians might otherwise have mistaken for their God. In this respect, it is not without reason that many of the theorists with whom I engage have been referred to as “secular prophets.” Iconoclasm and a passion for social justice are qualities that they often share with the prophets of Israel. Second, the influence of these thinkers and their interpretations of Christian texts is extensive, and Christians need to respond both to their criticisms and their constructive appropriations of theology. Finally, I am encouraged by the increasingly productive dialogue between Christian political theologians and secular cultural theorists over the last two decades, and I am eager to do my part to keep this dialogue alive. In academic cultural theory, as in every other sphere of culture, pluralism is an unavoidable reality, and the more we pursue forthright, constructive, mutually-respectful conversation across sociological and ideological lines, the better.

Christ's disciples hear and respond to the word of God in communion with the church throughout the ages and the nations.

Christians who confess the Nicene Creed are in the habit of asserting that the church is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic, and this confession should likewise be reflected in our habits of theological practice. In order for this to be the case, theologians must keep in the forefront of our minds that the Spirit who is at work in the scripture-reading communities of disciples with whom we identify has also been at work in the catholic church (little “c”) throughout time and space. While there is always the possibility that God will work in a particular time and place to bring to light powerful meanings and implications of scripture that have not been seen by Christians in other contexts, it is at least as likely that Christians in any given situation will let their cultural location blind them to the ways that scripture challenges their assumptions and ways of life. Modern Christians are often quick to notice how their pre-modern forebears allowed cultural values to constrain their theological practice in order to justified violence and oppression—the Crusades, the Inquisition, chattel slavery, anti-Semitism, misogyny—despite the many texts in which scripture clearly (to modern readers) condemns such practices. However, it is perhaps indicative of some contemporary Western Christians’ captivity to the modern myth of historical progress that we less-frequently ask ourselves in what ways our own cultural situation blinds us to challenges of scripture that our forebears might help us to see. For example, a modern American Christian who picks up the sermons of a fifth-century Christian like Basil of Caesarea—or even an eighteenth-century Christian like John Wesley—is likely to find disturbingly serious emphasis upon the New Testament’s consistent teaching

that storing up personal wealth is incompatible with seeking the kingdom of God.⁵ For such reasons, the wise theologian will learn to read scripture in a way that is shaped not only by his or her cultural context, but also by his or her communion with teachers from the catholic tradition who have read scripture in very different contexts.

The phrase “catholic tradition,” of course, needs some explanation, beginning with the word “catholic.” As a Baptist pastor working in the Protestant stream of Western theology, I understand the “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church” to consist of all people who have been reconciled to God by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. The ordinary visible signs of this reconciliation include participation with the church in its visible life of preaching, sacraments, fellowship, and witness to the world, as well as the more essential evidence of living faith, made manifest by the Spirit’s fruit of love, joy, and peace. Paul envisions the visible communion of this spiritual community when he says: “There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call— one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all” (Eph. 4:4-6). However, I do not claim exhaustive knowledge of the mysteries of God’s grace, and I am inclined to re-affirm Augustine’s conviction that there are many “sheep” outside the fold of the visible church, and many “goats” within this fold (*Tractates on the Gospel of John* 45.12). However, there is a need for some tentative criteria to help discern which teachers in the Christian tradition it would be wise to frequently consult, and I employ the word “catholic” to designate those theologians whose work assumes the authority of Christian scripture and the interpretive framework of the ecumenical creeds. Within this broad tradition, my work

⁵ For a collection of Basil’s sermons on wealth and poverty see, *On Social Justice: St. Basil the Great*, trans. C. Paul Schroedner.

frequently engages four figures—Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, and Calvin—who have exerted the greatest influence within my Protestant stream of the Western theology. My goal in reading scripture in dialogue with such figures is not to write a treatise on historical theology or to quote authoritative voices of the past in support for my own views. Rather, I am motivated by the conviction that reading the scriptures in conscious communion with the most influential thinkers of the tradition is both a corrective of the tendency to interpret scripture in a way that is over-determined by my own context and a means for re-discovering old insights into the scriptures that can enjoy new life in the present. However, I feel at liberty—as all Christians should—to argue with and criticize my forebears on the basis of scripture. In this respect, my model is Paul, who consulted those Christian leaders who were “supposed to be pillars” in order to confirm his own proclamation of the gospel (Gal. 2:1-10) while also telling ordinary Christians that not even apostles or “an angel of God” have authority to alter the one-and-only gospel of Christ that has been once-for-all delivered to the saints (Gal. 1:6-10).

This leads to my use of the word “tradition.” Though some Protestants (especially in America) have a tendency to dismiss all talk about tradition as a veiled attempt to diminish the central place of scripture in Christian doctrine, scripture itself takes a somewhat more nuanced view of the matter (cf. Mark 7:8; 1 Cor. 11:2; 2 Thes. 2:15). Personally, I find useful Jaroslav Pelikan’s pithy distinction between “tradition” and “traditionalism.” In his *Vindication of Tradition*, Pelikan quips: “Tradition is the living faith of the dead, traditionalism is the dead faith of the living” (65). The church of the present has received its faith from previous generations who heard and passed on the word of God, and in their writings this testimony is still “living and active” (Heb. 4:12).

To appropriate a Barthian metaphor: Opening the dusty, scripture-filled pages of an old theologian is often like loosing a tiger from its cage. Or, if a biblical metaphor seems more appropriate: The saints of earlier days often wielded the scriptures like “a hammer that breaks the rocks” of our cultural complacency “into pieces” (Jer. 23:29). Since we are all carrying certain hermeneutical habits and foregone interpretive conclusions, a dose of biblically-rooted theological “tradition” is sometimes just what is needed to shake us out of the slumbers of “traditionalism.”

1.5. Roadmap for Analysis

The next three chapters of this dissertation are each devoted to analyzing a concept that is central to Christian political theology and peacemaking: evil, justice, and love (respectively). Chapter 2, “Evil,” draws upon the works of Augustine, Pseudo-Dionysius, and Aquinas to retrieve a classic Christian understanding of evil as privation. I contrast this view, which posits the essential goodness of all created reality, with the radical dualism that I detect in violent forms of Marxist and postcolonial theory, as well as the tacit denial of any category called “goodness” that characterizes many forms of poststructuralist and pragmatist thought. In order to demonstrate the political potential of my Christian position, I analyze a number of sermons and essays by Martin Luther King Jr. to foreground the theological basis for his method of social resistance in the complementary assertions of creation’s essential goodness and evil’s terrible, destructive power. I argue that the parasitic nature of evil makes cultural criticism—the attempt to name what is wrong with the world—counter-productive unless it is based upon some positive vision of human flourishing. Consequently, I propose that a

constructive vision of the common good is a necessary precondition if cultural criticism is to have any redemptive function in human society. Towards this end, I argue that a biblically-rooted spiritual discipline of lament is an essential aspect of Christian peacemaking. Drawing on the work of Emmanuel Katongole and Chris Rice, I define lament as the discipline of naming and grieving for the world's brokenness, including the church's complicity in this brokenness. This is a form of cultural criticism that requires existential engagement and carries within itself the seeds of hope, because the world that is broken remains God's world, which means that evil will not have the last word.

Building upon this analysis of evil, chapter 3, "Justice," explores what it means to imagine and pursue a better world. Whereas the Western philosophical tradition generally understands the basic meaning of justice to be "allocating to each his own"—thus placing the emphasis upon weighing the relative merits of individuals and then distributing rewards and punishments accordingly—I argue that "righteousness and justice" in the Christian scriptures have a very different meaning. To do justice, according to the Bible, means acting in a way that corrects social evils while moving towards communal flourishing. In order to flesh-out what this entails, I develop theories of "primary" and "rectifying" justice. The former refers to an imagined positive state of affairs that can be called "just" and the departure from which is the meaning of social evil. I argue that a major reason for the analytic force of classical Marxist theory is that it developed a powerful vision of primary justice (the post-revolutionary communist utopia), but twentieth-century atrocities committed in the name of Marxism's utopian visions (which, in my view, are grounded in an inadequate account of human

flourishing) have produced a “crisis of utopia” in contemporary cultural theory. As a result, contemporary theorists have become incapable, admittedly so, of constructing a positive vision that could guide redemptive social action. With this situation in mind, I propose a scripturally-rooted Christian discipline of prophetic imagination (employing and extending a concept developed by Walter Brueggemann) that provides an alternative way of envisioning a world characterized by justice and peace while avoiding the pitfalls of reductionist and totalizing utopian pretensions.

In order to translate this discipline of prophetic imagination into constructive action, chapter 3 also includes my theological account of “rectifying justice,” which refers broadly to any act aimed at setting the world’s evils right and thus establishing primary justice. I argue that, according to biblical theology, divine and human acts of rectifying justice include both judgment and grace. Whereas judgment restrains the destructive force of evil through the use of coercive power, grace alone has the positive power to bring communal healing and thus create *shalom*. In scripture, gracious acts—deeds of forgiveness, generosity, and mercy, which treat people better than they deserve—are not suspensions of justice, but manifestations of rectifying justice in its most powerful form. Justice and love are thus cooperative and intrinsically related.

This leads to chapter 4, “Love,” in which I expound a Christian understanding of *agape* with an eye towards implications for political praxis. Grounding my account of love in the doctrines of the Trinity and justification, I argue that the church, as a community of love, is both an alternative polis—called to embody just and peaceable ways of being human within the chaos of the present world order—and an agent of change within every society where it dwells. Compelled by the gratuitous, self-giving

love of Christ to pursue the wellbeing of all people, the church should employ tactics of Christian community development to cultivate neighborhoods and cities where everyone can thrive, while also publicly confronting structures of power that inhibit human flourishing through nonviolent forms of prophetic advocacy.⁶ Attuned to the preaching and practice of Christian peace activists such as John M. Perkins, Martin Luther King Jr., and Desmond Tutu, I develop four paradigms for the church's cultural engagement, which can function as a guide for Christian peacemaking in the twenty-first century.

My central argument, developed throughout these chapters, is that the church is called to resist evil and cultivate *shalom* in the present world order through counter-cultural love, which is expressed by (1) radical practices of reconciliation across demographic barriers, (2) assets-based development strategies aimed at promoting comprehensive flourishing in under-resourced communities, and (3) nonviolent direct action that challenges injustices at the structural level while promoting a biblically-rooted vision of human solidarity. Such practices are not a distraction from the church's primary vocation to proclaim the gospel and make disciples, but an integral aspect of what it means to make a public, embodied confession of the lordship of Jesus Christ in the contemporary world. In a brief conclusion, I summarize the findings of my analysis in the form of twenty principles of Christian peacemaking. A combination of theological convictions and contextually specific strategies, these principles are

⁶ Christian community development (CCD) refers to a particular philosophy of ministry in under-resourced communities that has been pioneered by John M. Perkins and the Christian Community Development Association. I expound this philosophy in chapter 4. Whereas CCD focuses on fostering healthy communities at the local level, I use the phrase "nonviolent direct action" and "prophetic advocacy" to signify strategies aimed at confronting structural injustice at the systemic level. CCDA also has a national Biblical Justice Team that focuses on such advocacy work.

designed to provide a positive guide for the church's public witness and to spark further analysis of the ecclesiological and missiological implications of the biblical call to sow *shalom*.

As an exercise in public theology, these principles are also presented to Christian and non-Christian cultural theorists with the hope of stimulating further dialogue about the possibilities of collective public action. While it is a positive step that political theologians and secular theorists have begun engaging in more constructive dialogue in recent years, such conversations have not yet made much progress towards articulating new ways of living together in the world. In other words, this theorizing has focused more on developing tools to critique culture than imagining new possibilities for redemptive social practice. My proposals here are clearly tradition-specific, focused upon principles of peacemaking for the Christian church; and yet, I have repeatedly found that bringing such tradition-specific visions into the public sphere, where they can interact with alternative traditions and visions, is the best way to foster respectful and productive conversations. At the level of grassroots activism, I have frequently seen this kind of principled pluralism lead to cross-sectional efforts, involving adherents of various religious faiths as well as secularists in the kinds of community development and nonviolent direct action to which I am calling the church. These experiences encourage me to believe that bringing one's most deeply held beliefs into public can lead to surprising discoveries of common ground. In the context of twenty-first century globalization, pluralism, and violence, there is an urgent need not only to find such common ground but also to reimagine how we can stand together

against the tides of destructive practices and ideologies that threaten to overwhelm humans of every color, class, and creed.

2. Evil

2.1. Faces of Evil

On November 16, 2015—three days after a group of terrorists loyal to the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL) executed the coordinated murder of more than one hundred civilians in Paris—Barack Obama made a simple and powerful statement to members of the press assembled in Antalya, Turkey for the G20 summit: “ISIL is the face of evil.” The mood at this press conference was not conducive to raising precise philosophical questions, such as: Does evil-as-such exist? Is it a substance? What are the moral and political ramifications of calling a group of human beings “the face of evil”? In fact, the idea that evil has a visible aspect has become almost unquestionable in American public discourse since September 11, 2001, when—following the day’s infamous terrorist attacks—then-president George W. Bush told the American people, “Today our Nation saw evil, the very worst of human nature” (“Address to the Nation”). On the five-year anniversary of this attack, Bush doubled-down on this claim: “On 9/11, our nation saw the face of evil” (“A War Unlike Any Other”). In the aftershock of tragedies like the 2001 attack on New York City and the 2015 attack on Paris, the idea that we have seen evil face-to-face can seem not only plausible but—on a visceral level—self-evident.

I have frequently experienced the same kind of visceral response upon encountering human cruelty and injustice in more personal ways during the daily routines of pastoral ministry. Several years ago, a young man sat in my church office discussing a series of ethical and theological questions, but he kept letting phrases slip that made me think he really wanted to have a much more vulnerable conversation. As I

did my best to set him at ease, this young man started trembling violently. He then began to tell me what he had never told anyone before, the story of how his mother and her boyfriend used to tie him up and burn him with cigarettes in a motel room. In his words, they were trying to make him “go crazy” so that they could start collecting government-issued financial assistance for parents with disabled children.

Unfortunately, this combination of banal economic pragmatism with unspeakable brutality is much more common than one might think. I see it, for example, in the steady flow of vehicles that pick-up and drop-off women on South Robinson, a street in my neighborhood of Oklahoma City that is notorious for sex trafficking. The “good-ol’-boy” culture of local businessmen has a tendency to laugh and wink at this reality under the rubric of “having a little fun.” But those who are engaged in street-level community development understand that the girls and women involved in this enterprise—ranging from pre-pubescent children to women in their sixties—have undergone a months-long process called “seasoning” in which they were tortured and raped repeatedly every day in order to be psychologically prepared for the grueling business of helping good-ol’-boys to have a little fun. Moreover, through developing friendships with women in our community whose poverty has made them vulnerable to recruitment by exotic clubs and pornographers, my eyes have become increasingly open to the fact that there is no un-dehumanizing location on the spectrum of practices that commodify human sexuality. To pedal bodies is to treat them as less than human. And once a person is reduced to an instrument of profit, there seems to be no end to the cruelties that other humans will commit in order to keep profit margins high.

When encountering the intense pain that is inflicted on many of my friends and neighbors, I have frequently felt the impulse to look at those who are responsible for this needless suffering and pronounce that I have seen “the face of evil.” In this sense, I can sympathize with the language of presidents Obama and Bush in response to the brutal murder of civilians by terrorists. But the price of capitulating to such a visceral response is potentially very high. There is a strong sociological and psychological tendency to divide the world between good and evil people—with oneself on the good side—and then claim this state of affairs as the moral justification for defeating one’s enemies with nefarious means and a clear conscience. In this way, the concept of evil can easily become an ideological tool for maintaining violence while rendering oneself immune from criticism. This tendency is apparent at the level not only of individual conflicts, but also conflicts between families, tribes, ethnic communities, and nations.

Given the uptick in public rhetoric about evil since 9/11, it is not surprising that cultural theorists are giving increased attention to the concept. For example, Terry Eagleton’s recent book *On Evil* argues convincingly that statements such as the presidential declarations I quote above have the ideological effect of demonizing political enemies, precluding the possibility of understanding their motivations (on the grounds that pure evil cannot be expected to have comprehensible reasons for its actions), and protecting the consolatory self-assurance that one’s acts of violence against evil-as-such are necessarily righteous. However, Eagleton still seems to leave the door open for thinking about evil in this way when he suggests (based upon a secularization of Christianity’s concept of “original sin” that is rooted in the Freudian “death drive”) that there is such a thing—rare and exceptional—as radical evil, which

must be contrasted with the ordinary, everyday wickedness that comprises most of the world's problems. It seems to me that this way of thinking still makes it enticingly easy to assume that one's enemies are examples of the rare thing called "pure evil." A more radical position is staked out by Stanley Hauerwas' recent (and characteristically provocative) statement that "the Christian belief in God requires that one does not believe in the reality of evil or the devil" ("Seeing Darkness" 36). However, this assertion—which runs the risk of hastily dismissing the existential reality that the world is filled with senseless acts of cruelty—is in need of further elaboration and qualification.

In fact, I do not think that any social theory could jettison the concept of evil altogether. At a basic level, "evil" is simply a name for what's wrong with reality as we find it. Unless one is prepared to assert that the world is utterly wonderful, perfect, or—at least—incapable of improvement, then cultural critics have a responsibility to go on criticizing, and this criticism is the business of naming evils. However, there is an urgent need to be explicit about what exactly this means. When a theorist denounces particular evils such as terrorism, exploitation of the poor, or suppression of personal freedoms—which I likewise disapprove—it is worth asking what this denunciation implies. Is it simply a matter of stating one's strongly held but culturally contingent and ultimately arbitrary preferences? Or does denouncing particular actions imply that they violate an essential and empirically-verifiable "human nature"? Or is it that they disrupt the teleological progress of human history? In short, what makes some actions "denounceable" rather than others? Whereas American presidents may reductively associate "evil" with terrorism or communism, other streams of cultural theory have the

tendency to fill in the same conceptual space with different but still-reductive options such as class inequality (in the case of some Marxists), government interference with free-market economics (in the case of some capitalists), the restriction of personal agency (in the case of some libertarians), or sexual deviancy (in the case of some religious fundamentalists). In other words, criticizing particular evils from the perspective of a theoretical framework in which the implicit concept of evil is faulty often ends up being a counter-productive exercise that fans the flames of ideological conflict without moving us much nearer to a better world. Consequently, my aim in this chapter is to draw upon the Christian theological tradition in order to develop a theory of evil that may be employed to make better sense of the world's miseries and point the way towards the possibility of a more just and peaceful existence for all. This theory of evil helps me also to articulate for my present context some biblical contours for a renewed spiritual discipline of lament, wherein the church names and grieves for the world's brokenness while hoping for and pursuing peace.

My argument unfolds in several stages. In the first of these I analyze the contrasting theories of evil developed by two leading twentieth-century social thinkers, Hannah Arendt and Martin Luther King Jr. This analysis of Arendt and King brings to light important philosophical problems built into modern discussion of evil, and the subsequent section of the chapter seeks to address these problems via a retrieval of the ancient Christian theory of evil as a privation of the good. This theological tradition holds in tension scripture's teachings on the goodness of creation and the destructive power of sin, which leads me to analyze two central areas of Christian theology—the doctrines of humanity and original sin—followed by some broader reflections on how

the concept of evil fits into a robust understanding of God as creator. After laying out this theological framework, I compare and contrast the theological account of evil that I am commending with some alternative conceptions among secular theorists. This paves the way for a discussion of implications for praxis, in which I develop an account of lament as a discipline that integrates cultural criticism with spiritual formation en route to creative action in the world. My central argument is that understanding evil as a privation of the good—which denies it an essential place in the peaceful order of God’s creation—provides a framework for vigilantly opposing injustice while maintaining social hope, resisting the impulse to dehumanize one’s enemies, and living with creative love in the midst of a broken world.

Before proceeding, I want to clarify two points. First, I do not take up in this chapter the important questions about “natural evil”—earthquakes, tsunamis, animal violence, disease, and so forth—that could be addressed in relation to the doctrines of sin and creation. My focus is on evil as it is perpetrated by humans, both as individuals and as members of societies that have the potential to be just or unjust at the structural level. Second, I do not aim in this chapter to articulate a theodicy. My priority with regard to evil is not justifying the ways of God to man, but heeding the Isaianic imperatives: “Cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow” (Isaiah 1:16-17). The problem of evil is a problem of praxis.

2.2. Evil as Banality and Monstrosity

Contemporary reflections on the nature of evil are inevitably forced to grapple with the series of unprecedented atrocities that were performed on a world stage during the middle decades of the twentieth century. The brute fact that one-third of the global Jewish population was exterminated during the holocaust—magnified by the chilling and undeniably “modern” quality of ideological and technological precision with which these murders were carried out—has provoked a recalcitrant skepticism regarding the optimistic faith in human progress which animated nineteenth-century European empires as well as the ideological currents of Marxism, social-Darwinism, the most enthusiastic forms of free-market capitalism, and the most self-assured variations of post-Millennial Christian eschatology. For many twentieth-century onlookers, Auschwitz represented the re-emergence of evil as an inexorable force that shows no signs of being subdued by human progress. Shortly after Auschwitz, this suspicion garnered further support from the fact that—in terms of sheer numbers—the precedent-shattering destruction of human life in the holocaust was quickly surpassed by the Maoist Cultural Revolution, which had a far greater body count than the holocaust, as well as the genocides in Cambodia, where a larger percentage of the population was killed, and Rwanda, where life was taken roughly five times faster than in the Nazi death camps (Baumeister 383). By the latter decades of the twentieth century, there were good reasons for doubting that modern technological and humanistic “progress” would ever conquer the thing called “evil.” Unsurprisingly, public rhetoric about radical evil increased during this time and fueled new political visions of dualistic struggle in some quarters while sowing seeds of political despair in others.

It is within this context that we must understand Hannah Arendt's beautifully-written and highly-controversial *Eichmen in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963), which is the twentieth century's most influential text on the concept of evil. The book draws a portrait of Adolph Eichmann—a key actor in the Nazi “Final Solution” to the “Jewish Problem”—that offered an important challenge to contemporary representations of Nazis as inhuman manifestations of a monstrous, metaphysical malevolence. While many contemporaneous reports on the trial strongly suggest that anyone looking for “the face of evil” would do well to look at Eichmann, Arendt steadfastly refuses to represent him in such a way. She writes that Eichmann's judges knew “that it would have been very comforting indeed to believe that [he] was a monster” (276). The evidence, however, would not allow this consolation. In Arendt's judgment, “The trouble with Eichmann was precisely that so many were like him, and that the many were neither perverted nor sadistic, that they were, and still are, terribly and terrifyingly normal” (276). Whereas monsters can be identified and condemned easily enough, Arendt's narrative suggests that the worst Nazi crimes were perpetrated by unremarkable individuals like this tedious, cliché-spewing bureaucrat who looks shockingly similar to a high percentage of the human population in Western societies. The argument of Arendt's text is that evil turns out to be an everyday, humdrum, quotidian affair. Its face is not that of a monster, but an ordinary fool.

In order to tease out the philosophical implications of Arendt's analysis of evil, Susan Neiman's recent *Evil in Modern Thought*—an eloquent and provocative book in its own right—is a helpful touchstone. Neiman rightly points out that at the heart of Arendt's argument is the claim that evil actions are often carried out by people who do

not possess evil intentions. Atrocities tend to be perpetrated by the collaboration of many individuals, some of whom are driven by murderous ideologies, but most of whom have “no intention other than the wish to get by with a minimum amount of trouble” (334). Thus, evil actions have less to do with incomprehensible moral monstrosity, and more to do with perfectly explicable and trivial motivations—like getting a promotion, avoiding actions that would offend cultural norms (however perverse these might happen to be), making a few extra dollars, and so on. Neiman cites a letter in which Arendt says that evil lacks both “depth” and “demonic dimension” (301). Rejecting the tendency to represent evil as a monstrous force, Arendt compares it to a fungus that spreads on the surface of things (301). The main thrust of this argument is that evil is not a transcendent, incomprehensible force but a comprehensible, naturally-explicable phenomenon. Most importantly, Neiman argues that Arendt helps us to see that goodness, rather than evil, “should be portrayed with depth and dimension” (302). According to this interpretation of Arendt, reality should be imagined as deep goodness on the surface of which evil lurks, like thin a layer of fungus on a giant boulder.

One of many reasons why Arendt’s book remains controversial, however, is that people who have seen genocide, survived death camps, experienced torture, or confronted countless other atrocities are likely to find Arendt’s description existentially unreal. For example, many African Americans in the mid-twentieth century—having survived the horrors of Jim Crow and being immersed in the struggles of the Civil Rights movement—found more plausible Martin Luther King Jr.’s description of evil as a titanic power against which the forces of good must ceaselessly contend. King’s

famous sermon “The Death of Evil upon the Seashore” begins with the words: “Is anything more obvious than the presence of evil in the universe? Its nagging, prehensile tentacles project into every level of human existence. We may debate the origin of evil, but only a victim of superficial optimism would debate its reality. Evil is stark, grim, and colossally real” (75). King’s description of a colossal force with prehensile tentacles draws upon the biblical tradition of representing evil as a draconic monster that emerges from the waters of chaos and threatens to destroy the peace of God’s creation. He goes on to cite such biblical images and to claim that Jesus did not explain the origins of evil but “recognized that the force of evil was as real as the force of good” (75-76). For King, the ubiquitous presence of evil is a fact of human existence as well as a doctrine of biblical revelation, and the urgent human task is not explaining its origins but learning to live wisely in the light of its reality.

While King notes that traditional Christian teaching on God’s conflict with the devil has certain similarities with the dualism of other world religions, he quickly qualifies this statement about dualism by adding: “Christianity clearly affirms that in the long struggle between good and evil, good eventually will emerge as victor. Evil is ultimately doomed by the powerful, inexorable forces of good. Good Friday must give way to the triumphant music of Easter” (76). In the last sentence of this quotation, King makes a point that recurs frequently in his sermons and speeches: The resurrection of Christ reveals something important about reality, which King calls the “moral nature of the cosmos” or the “goodness at the center of things.” Despite the recurrence of circumstances suggesting that the forces of injustice will triumph—epitomized by the abuse of Roman imperial power in the execution of Jesus—King proclaims that God’s

word assures his people they will be vindicated and goodness will ultimately win. In the remainder of the sermon, he develops an allegorical interpretation of the exodus story to illustrate God's triumph over the forces of evil (represented, in this case, by Egypt's attempt to keep the people of Israel in slavery) and then applies this story to the contemporary struggle of the American Civil Rights movement as well as the anti-colonialist struggles of indigenous peoples in Africa and Asia. King's point is that, in the face of such overwhelming evils as institutionalized racism and violent colonialism, there are enormous pressures that tempt oppressed people either to give up in despair or to give in to the politics of hate. But the biblical affirmation that God will triumph over the colossal forces of evil enables people to keep speaking truth, resisting injustice, and loving their enemies with the confidence that the suffering of Good Friday will be followed by the triumph of Easter.

King's rhetoric has in common with Arendt a repudiation of the tendency to imagine radical, transcendent evil locked in perpetual, dualistic struggle with the forces of good. However, King also sought to emphasize the existential reality that irrational violence and injustice are facts of life with which we must contend. He thus sought to hold in tension two strands of scriptural teaching. On the one hand, both testaments of scripture are filled with images of dragons, serpents, and sea monsters, which—like the sea from which these beasts emerge—threaten to overwhelm life with death and peace with chaos. The scriptures likewise depict both God and humanity as engaged in a struggle against such forces (see Gen. 3:1-15; Ps. 74:12-14; Isa. 27:1; 65:25; Rev. 12:1-17; 20:1-3). Revelation 12:8 draws connections between the mysterious draconic figures of Old Testament mythography and links these to the early Christian

community's spiritual and political struggles when it speaks of the "great dragon . . . that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray." Similarly, Paul exhorts Christians to be ever-vigilant in the battle against mysterious evil forces that are at work within the world: "For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" (Eph. 6:12). Scripture and experience both prompted King to take seriously this biblical theme of continual struggle against evil powers in the world threatening to destroy human life.

On the other hand, the Bible repeatedly asserts that all contingent reality is created by the one God of Israel, that the creation is essentially good despite the mysterious presence of evil within it, and that the Creator will ultimately triumph over the monstrous forces of evil and chaos in the world. Before the story of humanity's first sin, scripture declares: "God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good" (Gen. 1:31). Moreover, despite the reality of sin in the world, Paul still declares that "everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected, provided it is received with thanksgiving" (1 Tim. 4:4). Because the whole cosmos is God's creation, God's good purposes for it cannot ultimately fail: "For from him and through him and to him are all things" (Rom. 11:36). In order to do justice to this strand of biblical teaching and to maintain hope for a better world in the midst of conflict with the forces of evil, King—like Arendt—is careful to emphasize that there is goodness at the heart of reality. The world, for all its brokenness, remains redeemable, and God intends to redeem it. For King, living as a Christian involves participating with God in this process of redemption.

It should be clear that I am sympathetic with certain aspects of the analyses of evil developed by both Arendt and King, but there remains an important tension between the two. Is evil better thought of as banality or monstrosity? Is it more like a fungus on the surface of things or a Titanic force with prehensile tentacles? My own view is that both sets of metaphors provide helpful ways of thinking about how humans experience evil, but neither address the more basic question about what evil is. For help with this question, I turn to an oft-misunderstood stream of Christian tradition, which teaches that evil, strictly speaking, is nothing at all.

2.3. Evil as Privation of the Good

The effort to make sense of the tension between scripture's teaching on the goodness of creation and the destructive power of sin has led many Christian theologians to appropriate and reconfigure a Greek philosophical conception of evil as a parasitic phenomenon, a privation of the goodness in which all things essentially participate. Because, as Stanley Hauerwas rightly notes, contemporary Christians and non-Christians both tend to find this denial of evil's existence unintelligible, it is worth taking some time to consider a few of the primary texts in which this idea is developed ("Seeing" 36"). The most important exponents of this idea within the Christian tradition are Dionysius, Augustine of Hippo, and Thomas Aquinas.⁷ In *The Divine Names*, Dionysius teaches that—because God is the source of all being, goodness, and beauty,

⁷ Dionysius is the pseudonym for an anonymous Christian author who wrote some time in the fifth or sixth century and developed a theological and mystical vision influenced by Neo-Platonism that would exert major influence in subsequent centuries. For a concise and highly-competent introduction to the Dionysian tradition, see Jaroslav Pelikan, "The Odyssey of Dionysian Spirituality." Though the translation of Dionysius's corpus in the *Classics of Western Spirituality* volume containing Pelikan's introduction is highly readable, my quotations are from the earlier and somewhat more precise translation by John Parker.

and all things exist by participation in the divine essence—existence is always also a participation in the Good and the Beautiful. In Dionysius’s Christian version of a Neo-Platonic conviction, everything that is, is good, and desires the Good, and longs to return to the Good (IV.23). Existing things—nature, matter, souls, bodies—simply by virtue of existing could not fail to be essentially good (IV.24-28). Consequently, evil cannot be thought of as an entity. Rather, evil is a privation of the good in particular things, which, insofar as they exist, remain fundamentally good. From this perspective, there is no such thing as pure evil. Rather, the “evil” in a thing is merely its lack of perfection, the incomplete realization of its proper virtues. The source of all goodness—of all existence—is the one, whole, and complete Good, whereas evil finds its origin in a multitude of partial deficiencies (IV.30). Goodness is the deep structure of reality, the creative and sustaining source of all that is. By way of contrast, “the Evil, *quâ* evil, neither generates, nor nourishes, nor solely produces, nor preserves anything” (IV.28). Evil is not a thing and cannot make things; it is a corruption of things and thus possesses only the power to distort what already exists. According to this view—which Augustine expresses almost verbatim and Thomas Aquinas later transposes into an Aristotelian register (drawing explicitly upon both Dionysius and Augustine)—evil certainly does not have “demonic depth” (to borrow Arendt’s phrase), for it has no “depth” at all.

The clearest way to demonstrate this is to consider how the tradition of viewing evil as privation talks about the devil. Dionysius writes that not even “the demons [are] evil by nature; for, if they are evil by nature, neither are they from the Good, nor amongst things existing; nor, in fact, did they change from good, being by nature, and

always, evil” (IV.23). If the devils had somehow departed utterly from the Good, then they would simply cease to exist. Moreover, demons, as rational essences, continue to have desires and aspirations, which—corrupt and corrupting as they may be—are not and could not be altogether evil. Demons “are not altogether without part in the good, in so far as they . . . live and think, and in one word—as there is a sort of movement of aspiration in them” (IV.23). Living, thinking, desiring, aspiring—these are all essential goods that necessarily participate in the Good. Nonetheless, the evil which can be said (in a manner of speaking) to exist within demons is “a turning aside and a stepping out of things befitting themselves, and a missing of aim, and imperfection and impotence, and a weakness and departure, and falling away from the power which preserves their integrity in them” (IV.23). For all of this falling away and imperfection, the demons continue to exist and to possess an angelic essence which is not only good but, in fact, a glorious good that cannot help but glorify the source of its being and goodness. In Dionysius’s words: “the angelic gifts which were given to them, we by no means affirm that they were changed, but they exist, and are complete, and all luminous, although the demons themselves do not see, through having blunted their powers of seeing good” (IV.23). For all their raging and rebellion, even the demonic hosts cannot quite pull off being evil in any deep and substantial way.

In his treatise *On Evil*, Thomas Aquinas relies heavily upon Dionysius, and especially on his arguments about the essential goodness of all existing things, including the devil.⁸ Aquinas quotes as authoritative Dionysius’s statement that the demons, insofar as they exist, are—like all existing things—essentially good. Then,

⁸ For a helpful survey of Aquinas’ views on evil that puts this treatise in the context of wider theological themes developed throughout his corpus, see Brian Davies, *Thomas Aquinas on God and Evil*.

after recapitulating many Dionysian arguments, Aquinas reflects at length upon the nature of the first evil act, wherein Lucifer and his followers turned from the good and became devils. After acknowledging that many traditional sources clearly assert that the devils' first sin was a prideful desire to be equal with God, Aquinas argues that they could not possibly have desired equality with God in any absolute sense. Because God alone is subsistent existing itself, Aquinas reasons that "everything other than God needs to exist as something sharing existence, which cannot be equal to what is by its essence existing itself"; consequently, neither Lucifer nor any other created thing could be equal with God without ceasing to be itself (Q.XVI, A.3). Moreover, since Lucifer was an un-fallen and purely intelligent being, he could neither have failed to know this nor desired such an absurdity.⁹ On Aquinas's account, Lucifer became the devil by desiring the good of supernatural happiness in contemplation of God in an improper way because—through excessive (but otherwise legitimate) delight in his own excellence—he failed to honor God by receiving infinite supernatural happiness as a gift of grace (which would have been an even greater good) and desired to achieve this felicity through his own unaided powers.

I indulge in this digression into scholastic niceties about a rather obscure matter of Christian doctrine to illustrate the point that a major stream of the Christian tradition disbelieves in the existence of radical or transcendent evil. According to those theologians who believe in the literal existence of a rational being called the devil, such a being must be essentially good (insofar as it exists) and cannot be considered transcendent (insofar as it is contingent, spatially and temporally circumscribed, and

⁹ Indeed, Dionysius, Augustine, and Aquinas all insist that desire as such is essentially for the good, and those desires that we call evil are merely misguided desires for some lesser good at the expense of a greater good.

limited in both power and knowledge). This is not to deny the diabolic capacity of evil to distort, corrupt, and disfigure, to cause pain and death, and to turn the best powers of created beings against themselves. But it is to deny evil a substantial or permanent place in God's creation or the status of an "equal but opposite" force locked in eternal struggle with goodness.

The point might be further elaborated by indulging in a thought experiment. What if Thomas Aquinas had the opportunity to respond to the self-assessment of Satan as he appears in John Milton's *Paradise Lost*? Milton deserves credit for painting the most vivid depiction of the devil in the Christian literary tradition, and Milton's devil has a penchant for putting on airs. Book IV of the poem describes Satan taking counsel with himself about the best course of action, now that his effort to overthrow God and rule heaven has been thwarted. After deciding that both a second onslaught and the pursuit of reconciliation with God would be futile, Satan concludes:

So farewell Hope, and with Hope farewell Fear,
Farewell Remorse: all Good to me is lost;
Evil be thou my Good; by thee at least
Divided Empire with Heav'ns King I hold
By thee, and more then half perhaps will reigne; (IV.108-112)

Having renounced all hope of achieving a future for himself that might reasonably be called "good," the devil pledges his allegiance to evil, and imagines that this will allow him to exercise dominion at least in that part of reality over which God's goodness does not hold sway. "Evil be thou my God" becomes Satan's way of claiming some dignity for himself as God's opposite, locked in dualistic struggle with the power of heaven, and thus holding "Divided Empire with Heav'ns King." In response to this speech, Aquinas might have pointed out that Satan, for all his pretension of desiring evil itself, is really manifesting a disordered desire for the good of his own native and God-given

preeminence above all other goods. After all, the words “Evil be thou my Good” were uttered by Satan only a few moments after his declaration of preference for reigning in hell over serving in heaven. Thus, the devil is not actually pledging allegiance to evil itself (a non-entity), nor is he desiring evil *qua* evil (an impossibility); rather, he is making the somewhat pathetic mistake of pledging total allegiance to the minor good of his own natural, God-given greatness to the exclusion of everything else. His problem is setting his sights too low. He’s not a “big” evil but a little, badly-deformed good. This exercise in putting the devil in his place, however, should not be seen as an effort to minimize the destructive, anti-creational potential of evil. Milton’s Satan may be unable to pull off the radical evil that he espouses, but this does not stop him from plunging himself, a third of his angelic compatriots, and the entire human race into considerable misery.

This digression into the realm of demonology also raises another important theme within the Christian tradition of theorizing evil as privation—namely, the impossibility for a rational nature to desire evil as such. Dionysius and Aquinas argue not only that the natures of devils remain necessarily and essentially good, but also that the evil desires of demons are evil only insofar as they are deficient with respect to some good. Desire as such is good, and so—at some level—are the objects of every desire. In *The Compendium of Theology*, Aquinas asserts that “evil cannot be desired or do anything except by the power of a connected good. . . . [A] privation, or evil, is desired, and it is the source of an action because of a connected good, not insofar as the

privation, or evil, is evil” (I.117).¹⁰ Later in this same text, Aquinas applies this theory in his interpretation of the biblical narrative of Adam and Eve’s sin. These first humans did not desire evil as such; rather, they were enticed towards inordinate desire of such goods as personal eminence and knowledge (I.189-191). According to Aquinas, the resulting corruption of human nature due to sin includes “the inordinate movements of desire, anger and other emotions” in directions that are “contrary to, rather than in accord with, the order of reason, very often obscuring reason and enticing it” (I.192). Reason and desire remain naturally and essentially good, but they are disordered, which means they are prone to work in imperfect ways.

On these matters, Thomas’ dependence on Dionysius is once again apparent, which may be demonstrated by considering a passage on disordered desire from *The Divine Names*:

All things which are, in so far as they are, both are good, and from the Good; but, in so far as they are deprived of the Good, are neither good, nor do they exist. . . . For example, the licentious man, even if he have been deprived of the Good, as regards his irrational lust, in this respect he neither is, nor desires realities, but nevertheless he participates in the Good, in his very obscure echo of union and friendship. And, even Anger participates in the Good, by the very movement and desire to direct and turn the seeming evils to the seeming good. And the very man, who desires the very worst life, as wholly desirous of life and that which seems best to him, by the very fact of desiring, and desiring life, and looking to a best life, participates in the Good. And, if you should entirely take away the Good, there will be neither essence, nor life, nor yearning, nor movement, nor anything else. (IV.10)

Due to the deprivation of a rational nature that has been partially alienated from the Good, desires may become disordered in such a way that the subject desires lesser goods (such as Lucifer’s exercise of his own natural virtues and Adam’s desire for

¹⁰ Likewise, in his treatise *On Evil*, he argues that the good is “what all things desire” and evil is a privation of the good, which leads him to conclude that “evil is necessarily what is contrary to the desirable as such” (Q.1, A.1).

eminence) over greater goods (such as God's gracious gift of supernatural joy through the perfect apprehension of his own essence as the Good and Beautiful). Though disordered desires for lesser goods are capable of causing great misery, no one—not the devil nor the most diabolical of human sinners—has ever desired evil as such.

From the perspective of cultural theory, the important thing here is that this Christian tradition of understanding evil as privation denies the existence of what is often called “radical evil.” For Dionysius and Aquinas, the idea of a purely chaotic and destructive agent with no regard even for proximate goods is simply an absurdity. Consequently, for any evil act, we can always ask questions about motives. And, theoretically at least, we should expect that these questions will have intelligible answers.

This point may be further illustrated by reflecting upon Augustine's famous fascination with the recollection of a petty adolescent crime, the theft of pears for which he had no hunger. The serious theological problem that this memory poses for Augustine is that he cannot recall a desire for any good thing that motivated his action. He writes: “I loved nothing in it except the thieving, though I cannot truly speak of that as a ‘thing’ that I could love, and I was only the more miserable because of it” (*Confessions* II.8). The action appears to have been motivated by a sheer, arbitrary desire for transgression. But Augustine, like Dionysius and Aquinas, asserts that desire as such is a good that can only be directed towards other goods. In *The Problem of Free Choice*, Augustine claims that “those goods which are sought by sinners are by no means evil. . . . Evil is the turning of the will away from the unchangeable good, and towards changeable good” (II.53). But the incident of the pear tree is one in which

Augustine's experience comes into tension with his theory. His action in this case may have done rather minimal damage, but it seems to manifest an impulse towards pure transgression, which, if full grown, would be the drive towards absolute annihilation.

Some light might be cast on this Augustinian problem by referring to an important passage of Aquinas' *Compendium of Theology*, in which he argues that, because the will is by nature free, it naturally desires "preeminence, so as to be subject to no one, or as few as possible" (I. 189). This is Aquinas's justification for the claim that all sinful desires—even the impulse to arbitrary rebellion against God—are really the desire for a privation that is attached to some proximate good (in this case, the natural "preeminence" of individual will). Viewed in this light, Augustine's desire to steal for its own sake—like Satan's declaration of allegiance to evil as such—can be seen as a perversion of God's good gift of relative human autonomy. God's image bearers are created to live freely in communion with God and according to their creative wisdom rather than being governed by any system of external laws. But this finite gift of freedom, if exalted over all other goods (such as communion with God or love for one's neighbor) can become manifest as a radically destructive impulse. Along these lines, Terry Eagleton makes the provocative claim that "the final triumph of the free spirit would be the annihilation of the whole world" (*On Evil* 66). The kind of pure freedom that Eagleton seems to have in mind is the sheer expression of personal volition without any constraints by external reality. This impulse—which sounds like a lot of contemporary discourse about personal agency being expressed through the (somewhat arbitrary) transgression of all "norms"—ends up having to resist everything, since it turns out that reality as such limits the expression of personal agency. (Only in

our dreams do we find the laws of physics conforming to our desire for flight and the wills of others conforming to our own.) Augustine’s expression of this kind of “free spirit”—an arbitrary transgression of moral norms for no apparent reason—troubled him so much because he saw that this kind of banal impulse, carried out to its extreme, has the power to devour everything that is.¹¹

2.4. God’s Image and Original Sin

This analysis of the Christian tradition of thinking about evil as privation has paved the way for me to discuss two major areas of theology—the doctrines of humanity and of original sin—which are at the heart of political theology. These doctrines also bring into sharp focus the above-mentioned tension between scripture’s teaching on the goodness of God’s creation and the pervasive power of evil. The Bible and the Christian tradition unambiguously affirm that humanity is created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-27), and, as such, possesses a unique capacity to commune with God and to display God’s glory in the world. And yet, scripture and the theological tradition are both likewise insistent upon the fact that sin has corrupted and defaced humanity in a profound way. Paul teaches that, having turned from God, humans “became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened” (Rom. 1:21). This state of affairs has left humans enslaved to inordinate desires that carry within themselves the seeds of annihilation. Elsewhere, Paul writes that humans are born “dead” in our “trespasses and sins,” doomed to live in the disordered “passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind” (Eph. 2:1, 3). This futile, self-

¹¹ For a lucid and well-informed survey of Augustine’s understanding of evil as it develops over time, see G.R. Evans, *Augustine on Evil*.

destructive way of life is not a matter of individual morality alone; it is also manifest in structures of social power and patterns of communal thought that partake in the demonic impulse to rebel against God and the peace of God's creation, which is why Paul remarks that individual evildoers are merely "following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience" (Eph. 2:2). In this bleak picture of humanity, Paul is building upon a theme that runs through both testaments of Christian scripture, as is apparent in Psalm 14:2-3: "The Lord looks down from heaven on the children of man, to see if there are any who understand, who seek after God. They have all turned aside; together they have become corrupt; there is none who does good, not even one." Both human individuals and human cultural activity are marked by ubiquitous corruption. Sin is everywhere, distorting God's image within creation.

And yet, the image of God has not been utterly effaced. Genesis 9:6 makes this clear by grounding the prohibition of murder in the affirmation that "in his own image God made humankind." The tension between humanity's essential nature as the image of God and the corrupting power of evil is poignantly manifest in the existential struggle for self-understanding that occasionally erupts in the prayers of Psalms. On one hand, the Psalms contain prayers of wonder in which the human self is seen as a glorious manifestation of the creator's goodness: "For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well" (139:13-14). On the other hand, the Psalms also contain blunt confessions of human depravity: "For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. . . . Indeed, I

was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me” (51:3-5). The conviction that human majesty and human evil are both present from the first moments of human existence comprises the conceptual tension at the heart of theological anthropology as well as the existential tension at the heart of the human condition. Humanity is God’s marred masterpiece.

The best thinkers of the Christian theological tradition have always maintained this tension between humanity’s essential goodness and pervasive corruption by affirming the doctrine of the *imago Dei* as well as the doctrine of original sin. As I demonstrate below, those theologians who are known for having the highest view of human nature (such as Aquinas) are careful to emphasize that every aspect of our humanness is nonetheless touched by the corrupting power of evil, and those theologians who are known for emphasizing humanity’s wickedness (such as John Calvin) are likewise careful to emphasize that God’s image is present in every fallen person, an image that calls for reverence and love. Nonetheless, in the modern era, theology has sometimes fallen into the trap of giving a simplistic answer to the equally simplistic question: “Are humans basically good or evil?” This question and its various answers have serious implications for the ways that one might think about human social and political structures and the best ways to respond to evil as we confront it in the world.

One illuminating way to explore the political implications of thinking theologically about the doctrine of humanity is to examine Martin Luther King Jr.’s reflections upon how this doctrine played an integral role in shaping his own philosophy of nonviolent resistance to personal and structural evil. King wrote an essay called “My

Pilgrimage to Nonviolence,” which appeared in a variety of different forms in magazines and in King’s books. The version of this text that appears in his book *Strength to Love* emphasizes his struggle to hold in tension the doctrine of the *imago Dei* and the doctrine of sin, both in his conceptual theology and his social praxis. King states that this theological problem became central for him during his senior year at Crosier Theological Seminary, during which he became temporarily “enamored” with the constructive insights of theological liberalism. After growing up in a black church tradition that he describes as “fundamentalist,” King experienced the intellectually energy, social engagement, and optimistic spirit of liberal, modernist Protestant theology as a breath of fresh air. “I almost fell into the trap of accepting uncritically everything [liberalism] encompassed,” King writes. “I was absolutely convinced of the natural goodness of man and the natural power of human reason” (155). However, as time passed, King became convinced that “the liberal doctrine of man” could not account for the realities of humanity’s great capacity for evil as he had experienced it in personal encounters with racism and in the highly publicized atrocities of the mid-twentieth century. Liberalism represented a “superficial optimism” that could not account for humanity’s “shameful inclination to choose the low road” (156). Painful experience opened King’s eyes to the “depths and strength of sin” (156). In another version of this essay, which appears in King’s *Stride Toward Freedom*, he emphasizes that the theological liberalism of “social gospel” thinkers such as Walter Rauschenbush lead to several major errors including naïve faith in “the nineteenth-century ‘cult of inevitable progress’” as well as the reductionist tendency to identify “the Kingdom of God with a particular social and economic system” (78).¹² Though he considered

¹² On the social gospel movement, see Walter Rauschenbush’s landmark book *Christianity and the Social*

liberalism to have made valuable contributions to American theological discourse, King ultimately rejected its optimistic anthropology, which led to uncritical faith in the historical myth of progressivism and the utopian social projects of modern reformers.

As a corrective to these errors, King pays tribute to the influence of neo-orthodox theologians in the Calvinist tradition who countered liberalism's oversimplifications by emphasizing the doctrine of sin. In *Strength to Love*, King emphasizes the influence of Reinhold Niebuhr in particular:

Niebuhr made me aware of the complexity of human motives and the reality of sin on every level of man's existence. Moreover, I came to recognize the complexity of man's social involvement and the glaring reality of collective evil. . . . I also came to see that the superficial optimism of liberalism concerning human nature overlooked the fact that reason is darkened by sin. The more I thought about human nature, the more I saw how our tragic inclination for sin encourages us to rationalize our actions. Liberalism failed to show that reason itself is little more than an instrument to justify man's defensive ways of thinking. Reason, devoid of the purifying power of faith, can never free itself from human distortions and rationalizations. (156)

King came to be convinced that, while humans continue to possess the unique dignity of bearing God's image, every aspect of human-ness has been adversely affected by sin. Even humanity's capacity for reason—of which modern liberalism made much—often functions as a mere tool to rationalize evil and extend the reach of oppressive power.

In the sermons contained in *Strength to Love*, King frequently re-emphasizes and develops this latter point, arguing that modern secularism is really a self-destructive "religion of man" that denies the necessity of moral and spiritual wisdom to guide the power obtained through scientific rationalism. This idolatrous worship of human reason leaves the door open for powerful leaders to make it a tool for ideological manipulation and the creation of ever-more-destructive technologies of domination. "Science gives

Crisis and Christopher H. Evans' wide-ranging text *The Social Gospel in American Religion: A History*.

man knowledge that is power,” King writes, but “religion gives man wisdom” to use this power redemptively (“Tough Mind” 4). In a lament on the travesties of the early twentieth century, King writes that the achievements of human reason that “yesterday were worshipped today contain cosmic death, threatening to plunge all of us into the abyss of annihilation. Man is not able to save himself or the world. Unless he is guided by God’s spirit, his new-found scientific power will become a devastating Frankenstein monster that will bring to ashes his earthly life” (“Our God” 110). Through his existential confrontations with human evil and his reading of the neo-orthodox strand of Calvinist theology, King became convinced that—due to the devastating effects of sin—there is no hope for social redemption unless divine grace enables human faculties to be wielded in the cause of justice, truth, and love.

However, King eventually became convinced that the neo-orthodox doctrine of humanity was unbalanced in its almost exclusive emphasis upon sin. In the version of “My Pilgrimage to Nonviolence” contained in *Strength to Love*, he writes: “If liberalism was too optimistic concerning human nature, neo-orthodoxy was too pessimistic” (156-157). King found help in reconciling these two strands of modern theology through his reading of existentialist philosophers from Kierkegaard and Nietzsche to Heidegger and Tillich. “An understanding of the ‘finite freedom’ of man is one of the permanent contributions of existentialism,” King writes (157). Moreover, existentialism’s

perception of the anxiety and conflict produced in man’s personal and social life by the perilous and ambiguous structure of existence is especially meaningful for our time. A common denominator in atheistic or theistic existentialism is that man’s existential situation is estranged from his essential nature. In their revolt against Hegel’s essentialism, all existentialists contend that the world is fragmented. (158)

Though he maintained that “the ultimate Christian answer is not found in any of these existential assertions” (158), it is clear that the themes of creation’s fragmentation and humanity’s existential alienation played a pivotal role in the distinctive formulation of theological anthropology that King eventually came to articulate. He sums up this formulation in the following words:

A large segment of Protestant liberalism defined man only in terms of his essential nature, his capacity for good; neo-orthodoxy tended to define man only in terms of his existential nature, his capacity for evil. An adequate understanding of man is found neither in the thesis of liberalism nor in the antithesis of neo-orthodoxy but in a synthesis that reconciles the truth of both. (157)

The essence of humanity is God’s image; thus humanity is essentially good, and the worst humans remain capable of redemption. But humanity in its current condition is profoundly corrupted by sin, which distorts every aspect of human personality, inclines humans towards self-destructive evil in their individual and collective endeavors, and causes the human experience of alienation at personal and social levels. Humans who hope for social redemption must learn to become transformed participants in God’s redemptive action in the world, and this is not possible apart from divine grace.

Before proceeding to discuss the political implications of this theological formulation, I think it is important to note that King’s excellent theological instincts eventually lead him to a position at which he might have arrived sooner if the theological fare being served at Crosier Theological Seminary during his formative years had not been so exclusively modern. King’s mature articulation regarding the doctrine of humanity—formulated as a creative synthesis of antithetical positions within contemporary theological discourse—is really the recovery of a classic doctrine in its Protestant register. Polarizing questions about humanity’s goodness or badness that

emerged from the philosophical and political presuppositions of the modern era—combined with an unfortunate tendency of the time to make sweeping generalizations about theologians of the past without paying much heed to the primary texts that these figures wrote—created an atmosphere in theological education of the early-to-mid-twentieth-century that inclines me to excuse King for his occasional repudiation of views erroneously ascribed to prominent thinkers in the Christian tradition. In a sermon titled “The Answer to a Perplexing Question,” for example, King writes:

The doctrines of justification by faith and the priesthood of all believers are towering principles that we as Protestants must forever affirm, but the Reformation doctrine of human nature overstressed the corruption of man While rightly affirming the sinfulness of human nature and man’s incapacity to save himself, the Reformation wrongly affirmed that the image of God had been completely erased from man. This led to the Calvinistic concept of the total depravity of man. (137)

King is correct to denounce any view of sin claiming that the image of God has been erased. He is also right to point out in this same sermon that many contemporary Calvinists seem to hold such a view and make it the foundation for their assertion that human social action is inevitably futile, and should be replaced by an exclusive focus upon preparing human souls for the blessed departure from this depraved world. However, it is worth noting that these regrettable doctrines find their origin in late-modern controversies; Calvin taught no such thing.

In fact, Calvin roots his exposition of the Christian ethic of love for enemies in a highly nuanced theological anthropology with which King would have been quite happy. In a pastoral treatise titled *The Golden Booklet of the True Christian Life*, Calvin writes: “The Lord enjoins us to do good to all without exception, though the greater part, if estimated by their own merit, are most unworthy of it” (33). This statement is marked by Calvin’s well-known emphasis upon the human capacity for evil, which is

why he says, with a pessimism that some might consider realism, that most human beings, considered on their own merits, do not seem worthy of our love. But he continues: “Scripture subjoins a most excellent reason, when it tells us that we are not to look to what men in themselves deserve but to attend to the image of God, which exists in all, and to which we owe all honour and love” (33). Here Calvin—like King and most of the Christian tradition—links Christ’s call to universal love to the doctrine of the *imago Dei*. He notes that God’s Spirit graciously begins the process of restoring the marred divine image in those who trust Christ, but he makes it quite clear that even the most vicious, unregenerate person—say, a bitter enemy whom we might consider worthy of hatred and contempt—has a right to our love.

Calvin writes that Christ puts himself in the place of such “unworthy” persons and tells Christians to love their enemies with the love that is owed to Christ. Through learning to see Christ in their enemies, Christians are enabled by God’s grace to do that which is “altogether against nature, to love those that hate us, render good for evil, and blessing for cursing, remembering that we are not to reflect on the wickedness of men, but look to the image of God in them, an image which, covering and obliterating their faults, should by its beauty and dignity allure us to love and embrace them” (34). For Calvin, Christians’ communion with Christ trains them to see the beauty of God’s image that remains even in those whom they are most inclined to hate. Love is not a matter of merely fulfilling one’s duty; it is the process of seeing and being allured by the beauty of God apparent in every human person. To grow in love is to have one’s

eyes trained by the Gospel to see and reverence the inherent glory and dignity that is the essence of every person.¹³

Any doctrine of “total depravity” taught by Calvin means not that humans are “as bad as possible” or “bad all the way down,” but that the beauty of God’s image, which remains the essence of humanness, has been affected in its totality by the distorting and corrupting power of sin. A less misleading term for this position might be “pervasive privation,” and Calvin’s teaching that the totality of human personality is affected by sin is exactly what King taught as well. Moreover, a theologian like Aquinas, who offers a more positive appraisal of unregenerate human nature than figures like Augustine and Calvin, does not disagree on this basic point. In *The Compendium of Theology*, Aquinas writes that “the whole, well-ordered integrity” of the human person before sin was dependent upon the “subjection of the human will to God” (146); thus, after humanity’s primal rebellion against God, every part of human personhood became corrupted by sin. Aquinas writes that “the perfect subjection of the lower powers to reason and of the body to the soul was lost when the human will was withdrawn from subjection to God. And so the human being experienced, in a lower sense appetite, inordinate movements of desire, anger, and other emotions” (146). For Aquinas, sin causes human desires, which are essentially good, to become inordinate and misdirected, and such unruly passions become the taskmasters of reason, whose dimmed light is directed by appetites that it should be directing. “For, along with the abundant inordinate emotional movements in the lower appetite, the light of wisdom, by which God illumined the human being when the will was subject to God, was lacking in

¹³ Calvin’s fuller statement of the doctrine of humanity can be found in *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I.15 and II. 1-6. See also Richard Prins’ helpful “The Image of God in Man and the Restoration of Humanity in Christ: A Study in Calvin.”

reason” (147). Though there are differences of great theological and practical importance between Calvin and Aquinas, my point is simply that both of them would agree with the basic theological anthropology sketched out by King. Humanity is essentially good, the image of God, but this image has been distorted in all of its parts by sin, which turns humanity’s best capacities into slaves of the inclination to evil, the impulse to exalt lower goods (such as personal comfort or the expression of individual will) over higher goods (such as love for one’s neighbor). The image of God remains the essence of human identity, but it suffers pervasive privation.

What, then, is this image? Though articulating a full biblical theology of the *imago Dei* would require a book-length study of its own, it is possible to highlight four aspects of scripture’s teaching on this theme that have exerted significant influence in the Christian theological tradition.¹⁴ First, the phrase “image of God” itself suggests that within the created order humanity receives a particular vocation to display (signify, reflect, image-forth, represent) the glory and goodness of the Creator. Second, this imaging-forth involves a degree of participation in the Creator’s sovereign rule over the world. Verse 26 makes this clear: “Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.’” Humanness involves exercising dominion over the earth.¹⁵ However, this does not mean that the earth

¹⁴ For helpful explorations of this doctrine that have informed my own view, see Richard Lints, *Identity and Idolatry: The Image of God and its Inversion*; Charles Sherlock, *The Doctrine of Humanity*; Hans Schwarz, *The Human Being: A Theological Anthropology*; Craig Bartholomew and Michael Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture* (32-46); and Willem VanGemeren, *The Progress of Redemption* (pp. 42, 46, 52, 59, 62-63, 83).

¹⁵ In the Ancient Near East, kings could not be everywhere at once in the realms under their authority and protection, so they frequently erected statues of themselves as signs of their dominion. Numerous biblical

belongs to humans to exploit as they choose. The earth is God's, and humans are given the authority of stewards to care for the world in accordance with the Creator's aims.¹⁶

In this regard, Walter Brueggemann helpfully writes: "With the gift of dominion intrinsic to human personhood comes immense responsibility, for the work of humankind is to care for the earth even as the Creator has already begun to care, to protect and enhance the earth as God's creation" (*Reverberations* 106). This responsibility of stewardship/dominion leads to a third important element of the *imago Dei* apparent in this text: Human vocation involves consciously receiving, trusting, and responding to the words of God. Though God pronounces blessing on the animal creation (1:22), humans alone are spoken to in the form of a direct address (1:28).¹⁷

Signifying God and extending his dominion of peace both involve a relationship of trust wherein humans live in faithfulness to the divine words. Or, to state this from another angle, human vocation involves glorifying the Creator by a relational participation with God in the work of cultivating peace and wholeness on earth. Fourth, all of these aspects of human identity are expressed in a manner that is intrinsically relational: humanity as a whole—male and female—is said to bear the divine image (Gen. 1:26-27), and the biblical text specifically declares that it is not God for man to be alone (Gen. 2:18). Viewed, in the light of a Christian understanding of the trinity, this means that humanity's intrinsic relationally gives expression to God's eternal nature as a community of divine persons.

exegetes—including Waltke and Brueggemann—have argued that the terms "image" and "likeness" of God are in part a reference to this practice. Taken in this light, Genesis 1:26-27 suggests that humanity—male and female—is a sign of God's rule in the earth, an extension and expression of the kingly authority by which God has cultivated ordered peace from the chaos of the primeval world according to Genesis 1:1-25.

¹⁶ The psalms frequently declare that the earth belongs to Creator-God, who has delegated limited authority to humanity. See Psalm 24:1-2 and Psalm 8:3-9.

¹⁷ See Waltke, 67, for exegetical and theological reflections on this point.

The corruption of the *imago Dei* is described in Genesis 3, which Christian theologians have traditionally interpreted in terms of humanity's primal "fall" into sin. Numerous contemporary exegetes have argued that a full-fledged Christian theology of "the fall" can only be imposed upon this text artificially, but it seems clear to me that a wide-angle view of Gen. 3-11 reveals a de-creational rupture of the peaceful order cultivated from primeval chaos in the narratives of Genesis 1 and 2.¹⁸ The triggering event of this series of disasters is humanity's decision to heed the counsel of a mysterious draconic figure, by seeking to live independently of God's wisdom (Gen. 3:1-6).¹⁹ In place of the freedom that is expressed through covenantal relationship with the Creator, humanity opts for a radical autonomy, the unhindered assertion of its own will without reference to God or God's purposes for the world, which—I have argued in this chapter—can ultimately be expressed only by an irrational will-to-annihilation.²⁰ Already in chapter 3, guilt, fear, shame, and death enter the human scene for the first time. Indeed, Adam and Eve's relationships of peace are replaced by a threefold alienation from God, the natural world, and one another (3:10, 15-19, 22-24). In chapter

¹⁸ For exegetical criticisms of the doctrine of the Fall, see Brueggemann, *Reverberations*, 79-80. On my view, the discrete witness of Genesis 3-11 does not justify a robust doctrine of the Fall in terms of humanity's ontological corruption in alienation from God. However, Paul does construct such a theology (see, for example, Rom. 5:12-21 and 1 Cor. 15:21-22, 45-49) and any constructive theology that takes seriously the full canonical witness will reckon with Paul's interpretation of Genesis in the light of Jesus Christ.

¹⁹ I interpret the serpent (Hebrew: *nâchâsh*) of Genesis 3:1-6, like the sea monsters (Hebrew: *tannîym*) mentioned in Genesis 1:21, as draconic figures associated with the forces of chaos. Such an interpretation has canonical resonances with Daniel's "great beasts" who "came up out of the sea" (7:3) and Revelation's riff on Daniel's theme: "Then the dragon took his stand on the sand of the seashore. And I saw a beast rising out of the sea" (13:1). Numerous other references to Leviathan and sea monsters could be enumerated, of which Is. 27:1 is particularly relevant. These and other texts often associate the monsters of the sea with oppressive political powers that threaten to unleash chaos and destruction on the earth, and in Revelation various recurring biblical figures—Babylon, the dragon, the "ancient serpent," Satan, the Devil—merge into a single force or network of forces opposed to God.

²⁰ Craig Bartholamew and Michael Goheen develop an exegetical case for interpreting humanity's primal rebellion Genesis 3-11 as a self-destructive attempt to assert radical autonomy in *The Drama of Scripture*, 40-41, 50-52, 56.

4, Cain's strife with God and Abel are interrelated, and his murder of the latter introduces a theme of "fratricidal strife" that becomes an echoing motif as the narrative of Genesis unfolds and reaches a climax in the stories of Jacob's conflict with Esau and Joseph's conflict with his brothers (Wenham 250).²¹ The violence continues to spread, and by chapter 5 the text declares that "the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually" (6:5). This leads to the great act of de-creational judgment—the flood—in which God causes the waters of chaos to once again cover the earth, preserving a faithful remnant of humanity by grace. This unraveling of *shalom* as a result of humanity's rebellion reaches a climax with the story of Babel (11:1-9), in which humanity's authority as vice-regents of creation is expressed in a perverse and oppressive way that is opposed to God and God's commission to humanity in the "cultural mandate." Thus, the prologue of Genesis, taken as a whole, teaches that the human capacity to display God's goodness through peaceful relations with God and one another—as well as *shalom*-making authority in the world—remains present, but it has been badly distorted by sin. Humanity still bears the divine image, but evil's power to corrupt and destroy is everywhere present.

2.5. Evil and God's Creation

At this point, I am in a position to step back and consider some implications of the theory of evil I have been advancing. To call evil a privation of the good without an

²¹ The ultimate resolution of these latter two examples of brotherly conflict already suggests that humans walking in faithful covenantal relationship with God may learn to embody a life of grace and forgiveness that offer a hope for peace in the midst of human chaos.

essence or a permanent place in the order of things is to make radical claims about the nature of God (the infinite fount of all being) and creation (the totality of finite reality). This way of talking about evil is also a way of affirming a distinctively Christian vision of God and the world. About God, Christians confess that he is the source and end of all finite goods, and in him there is not the slightest presence of any evil. The Bible frequently declares that God is good (1 Chron. 16:34; Ps. 34:8; 119:68; Mk. 10:18), and St. James adds: “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change” (Jas. 1:17). These scriptural texts give Christians good reason to think critically about the meaning of theological claims that God is “above” and “beyond” the categories of good and evil. If this is meant to communicate that it is a dangerous error to construct human systems of morality and then retrofit a concept of “God” to fit into these constructions, then the warning is a valid one. But scripture asserts that all goodness comes from and signifies God’s immutably good nature, which is freely and perfectly expressed in every act of God’s will. If “goodness” is not rooted in the eternal nature of God, then it must either be an arbitrary creation of the Almighty will, which the Almighty may or may not apply as a standard for his own actions (a terrifying and un-Christian idea), or “goodness” must be some standard that is outside of God’s nature and restrains God’s actions (in which case, he not God). David Bentley Hart rightly argues that we cannot “subject God to an ‘ethical’ interrogation, as though he were some finite agent answerable to standards beyond himself,” but he goes on to add the important caveat that if “we use words like ‘good,’ ‘just,’ ‘love’ to name God, not as if they are mysteriously *greater* in meaning than when predicated of creatures, but instead

as if they bear transparently *opposite* meanings, then we are saying nothing” (14).

Scripture, of course, does use all of these words for God (see, for example: Ps. 11:7; 100:5; 136:1; 145:17; 1 Jn. 1:5; 4:8). Calling evil a privation of the goodness that is the ground of all being safeguards the Christian confession that all finite reality comes from and points towards the good God who has been disclosed to humanity in the person of Jesus Christ.

Thus, denying that evil is a substance is also a way of confessing the doctrine of Creation *ex nihilo*. Christians do not believe that the world consists of a dualistic struggle between good and evil or matter and spirit because Christians confess that God called forth all of reality—visible and invisible, material and immaterial—from nothing. Creation is not a result of warring gods but a witness to the goodness of the one God. Because all creation—all finite reality—comes from God, evil has no permanent place in God’s good order of creation.

The unabashedly positive assessment of creation on the part of Christian scripture and tradition is not naïve optimism but an act of defiance and eschatological hope. To confess that evil has no part in God’s good world is to pass emphatic judgment upon those evils with which one is confronted today and remember that they will disappear tomorrow. This is why the prophet Jeremiah urges Israel to mock the non-gods who threaten evil in the same breath that he calls for worship of the one creator: “Thus shall you say to them: The gods who did not make the heavens and the earth shall perish from the earth and from under the heavens. It is he who made the earth by his power, who established the world by his wisdom, and by his understanding stretched out the heavens” (Jeremiah 33:11-12; viz. 2:1; 5:7; 16:20). The gods, which are no-

gods, did not make the world. Creation belongs to the one true God, and when this God has completed the ongoing process of creation, the non-reality of evil will be swallowed up by the reality of goodness. The end of creation is the *shalom* of God: peace, fullness, justice, and joy.

The themes of evil and creation thus come into direct contact with the theme of sowing *shalom*—the church’s vocation to make peace in the world—which is the driving concern of this dissertation. In fact, Cornelius Plantinga’s wise and engaging book *Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* defines sin as “vandalism of shalom.” Sin is a turning away from God and God’s good purposes for the world, which inevitably also means that sin is senseless and destructive. It is both a symptom and a cause of deterioration in the self and in society. Conversely, resisting evil means partnering with God in the work of creation over-against the anti-creational tendency towards death, corruption, and decay that threaten the peace of God’s world. Because evil’s destructive presence is pervasive in the world, naïve optimism is precluded, and the first step towards sowing *shalom* must always be learning to see, name, and turn from the presence of evil in the self. But because evil is ultimately a parasite—neither creative nor productive, but a mere perversion of creation—peacemakers can be sure that they are working with God and with the grain of God’s world.

This Christian confidence in the ultimate goodness of all created reality and the consequent inevitability that creation will one day perfectly reveal the Creator was the wellspring of hope that sustained Martin Luther King Jr.’s prophetic mission. In his classic sermon, “Our God is Able,” King declares:

Christianity contends that evil contains the seed of its own destruction. . . . God is able to conquer the evils of history. . . . In our sometimes difficult and often

lonesome walk up freedom's road, we do not walk alone. God walks with us. He has placed within the very structure of this universe certain absolute moral laws. We can neither defy nor break them. If we disobey them, they will break us. The forces of evil may temporarily conquer truth, but truth will ultimately conquer its conqueror. (*TOH 506-7*)

For King, “evil contains the seeds of its own destruction” precisely because creation—“the very structure of this universe”—is marked by God’s moral character. God’s personal presence is with those who walk with the moral grain of the universe, and—when evil appears to win a local victory—Christianity reminds the downtrodden that “truth will ultimately conquer its conqueror.” This allusion to the resurrection of Christ is also a statement about the nature and destiny of creation itself.

Indeed, King frequently returns to the idea that the incarnation and resurrection of Jesus are the moments of history that most fully reveal the purpose towards which God has ordered his creation. In his “Christmas Sermon on Peace,” King laments the evils plaguing the world—stating bluntly that humans usually possess “neither peace within nor peace without” (253)—and then goes on to articulate his reason for hope and perseverance in the midst of the world’s chaos: “If there is to be peace on earth and good will toward men, we must finally believe in the ultimate morality of the universe, and believe that all reality [rests] on moral foundations” (257). King insists defiantly, in the face of personal experience that seems to suggest the contrary, that moral goodness is the very fabric of reality. In the next sentence, King goes on to make clear that the basis for this defiant faith is his confession of the salvation-historical work of Christ:

Something must remind us of [the ultimate morality of the universe] as we once again stand in the Christmas season and think of the Easter season simultaneously, for the two somehow go together. Christ came to show us the way. Men loved darkness rather than the light, and they crucified him, and there on Good Friday on the cross it was still dark, but then Easter came, and Easter is an eternal reminder of the fact that the truth-crushed earth will rise again. . . . And so this is our faith, as we continue to hope for peace on earth and good will

toward men: let us know that in the process we have cosmic companionship.
(*TOH 257*)

King makes profound theological claims here. Christmas and Easter are somehow connected. The first is the moment when God brings creation into union with himself, and the second is the moment in which the God-man rises from corruption and death, bringing creation along with him. For King, these moments are revelatory; they pull back the curtain of history to reveal the moral structure of reality. And if this is what reality is like, then there is no reason to despair in the struggle for peace and justice. Christians have reason to persevere in the struggle against evil because God will finish his work of creation, and there is no ultimate place for evil in God's world.

This analysis of King's theology of creation prepares me to offer some clarification of his explicit representation of evil as a monstrous force locked in dualistic struggle with God in "The Death of Evil upon the Seashore." The Christian tradition of thinking about evil as privation can talk about evil's existence in two ways. For example, Aquinas states that "we can . . . understand evil in one way as the subject that is evil, and this subject is an entity. In the second way, we can understand evil itself, and evil so understood is the privation of a particular good, not an entity" (*On Evil* Q1; 58). In the first way, evil may be said to exist, but this means that some good thing is marked by corruption. Understood in this way, King's assertion that the existence of evil is among the most obvious facts of human experience is one to which I heartily assent. However, King's statements could also be understood to suggest that evil exists as a substance, which would be theologically problematic. However, I suggest on the basis of the foregoing analysis that the tradition of thinking of evil as a

privation actually makes the best sense of King's claim that the structure of the universe reflects the moral character of God.

David Bentley Hart helps to connect the dots between Christian ways of viewing God, creation, and evil in a formula of elegant simplicity: "Precisely because creation is not a theogony, all of it is theophany" (5). The world is not the result of gods struggling against one another. Creation is the act of the one, eternal, triune, good, and simple God, who freely calls forth all contingent things from nothing. Consequently, all of creation is theophany. Because God's act called all things into existence—and all God's acts are free expressions of God's immutable nature—creation points back to God and discloses this nature. Given that Christians who make this claim also confess the goodness of God and the undeniable experience of evil, this can only mean that God's act of creation is not yet complete. God is still creatively at work, sowing peace in his world, and this work is moving towards its consummation in the reconciliation of all things. When Christians deny that evil is a thing, they are confessing that Christ is the ontological and eschatological *telos* into whom creation is being gathered (see Eph. 1:7-11; Col. 1:15-20).

In addition to its ontological and eschatological connotations, the claim that evil has no place in being is also ethical and political. When St. Paul taught that God's plan for the fullness of time is to gather up all things in Christ (Eph. 1:10), he also taught that the gift of the Spirit calls forth a community of peace in the present whose way-of-life is meant to signify the end (Eph. 1:11-14; 2:10-22; 4:22-31). Once again, King's "Christmas Sermon on Peace" is a helpful touchstone for thinking about how ethical means cohere with ontological and eschatological ends. According to King, the only

way to truly resist evil in the present world order is to act in a manner that bears witness to the reality that a new order has already broken into world history. He illustrates this point with a lament:

The conquerors of old who came killing in pursuit of peace, Alexander, Julius Caesar, Chalemagne, and Napolean, were akin in seeking a peaceful world order. If you will read *Mein Kampf* closely enough, you will discover that Hitler contended that everything he did in Germany was for peace. . . . Every time we drop our bombs in North Vietnam, President Johnson talks eloquently about peace. (255)

The bitter irony with which King laments the vain human tendency to fight evil with evil is followed by a plea for humanity to learn “that peace is not merely a distant goal we seek, but that it is a means by which we arrive at that goal. We must pursue peaceful ends through peaceful means. All of this is saying that . . . means and ends must cohere because the end is preexistent in the means” (255). To deny evil a place in the order of things is to declare that the end of God’s creation is the eschatological peace of Christ, and King reminds us that confessing Christ is a matter of embodied praxis. To resist evil through peaceful means is to bear witness that God’s future is already present in the world, drawing creation towards its end.

2.6. Alternative Contemporary Approaches to Evil

Contemporary political theorists frequently praise the American Civil Rights movement as an exemplary model of political praxis that is genuinely liberating, but they less frequently take note of the metaphysical quality of the discourse that animated this movement. Leaders and visionaries such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Howard Thurman repeatedly assert a distinctively Christian ontology as the basis for their political praxis. King’s sermons, speeches, and books are riddled with affirmations

about the moral structure of the cosmos and assurances that acts of *agape* are a participation in the ground of all being, and so endowed with the power to infuse history with the redeeming presence of eternity. He also constantly reminds his hearers of the need to search out the pervasive and destructive presence of evil in themselves while striving to see the goodness that is at the essence of even the most depraved human beings. In Thurman—who was a friend, mentor, and spiritual advisor to many Civil Rights leaders—these metaphysical musings are even more pronounced because his mysticism speaks constantly about cultivating awareness of God’s transcendent love that is always immanent within one’s self and one’s neighbors. This awareness leads to acts of justice and reconciliation, which have the power to interrupt the cruel logic of history and instantiate the kingdom of God on earth.²² Likewise, Desmond Tutu, whose theology is steeped in the writings of American Civil Rights leaders, would frequently remind his political opponents during the fiercest moments of South Africa’s anti-apartheid struggles that he was inviting them to join the winning side, because the moral nature of the cosmos reflects the peace of a God who is love, and who has been made known in Jesus Christ (*Made* 189).²³ In fact, these leaders all praised Marxism’s

²² For example, in *Disciplines of the Spirit*, Thurman teaches practices for cultivating awareness of God’s presence in and through all things. He studies the prayers of Jesus, whom Thurman says was aware that “God breathed through all that is” (89). Thurman calls for the cultivation of a “mood of reverence,” which makes the human spirit receptive to “the greatness of God at work in the world of nature,” in which divine “harmony” is everywhere present (93). He goes so far as to identify “an element of profound truth in the outlook of pantheism, which sees the work of God in the world of nature with such clarity as to identify God with his world; the temptation is hard to resist” (93). Though he goes on to reject pantheism, which would make God a “prisoner of His creation” (93), Thurman’s views about the presence of God in all of creation—uniting and binding all things—are central both to his mysticism and his political philosophy. Such views also run throughout Thurman’s *Meditations of the Heart*.

²³ These views are most clearly and fully elaborated in *Made for Goodness: And Why This Makes All the Difference*, which Desmond Tutu wrote with his daughter Mpho Tutu.

commitment to economic justice but argued that metaphysical materialism will inevitably mire the struggle for equality in non-redemptive violence or in despair.²⁴

The way that figures such as Thurman, King, and Tutu talk about good and evil might be contrasted with the theoretical discourse of Frantz Fanon, whose metaphysical materialism did not stop him from employing a sociological dualism in his own struggle for racial justice. In his eloquent and morally passionate manifesto *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon describes how the French colonizers of Algeria employed an oppressive form of Christian discourse to construct a racialized version of Manichean dualism in which dark-skinned natives came to embody the evil forces of chaos that threaten the truth, beauty, and goodness of the white colonizers. Rather than challenging this dualism, however, he inverts it, declaring: “Truth is what hastens the dislocation of the colonial regime, what fosters the emergence of the nation. . . . And good is quite simply what hurts *them* most” (14). Rejecting abstract notions of freedom and justice as European ideals and thus tools of the colonizers, Fanon’s moral passion is grounded totally in doing violence to the political enemy, which constitutes truth and the only good. According to this theoretical purview, good becomes parasitic on evil; it is the mere opposite of colonialism. This moral logic makes it natural for Fanon to proclaim that “violence represents the absolute praxis” (44) and the only “work of the colonized is to imagine every possible method for annihilating the colonist” (50). Moreover, he rejects all talk about nonviolent resistance as mere capitulation to the existing regime and asserts that individual and communal healing can only be achieved through revolutionary violence; for “the colonized, life can only materialize from the rotting cadaver of the colonist” (50). Fanon’s contribution to contemporary theoretical

²⁴ See, for example, King’s “How Should a Christian View Communism?”.

understandings of the psychology of colonialism has been invaluable, but I cannot share his faith in the regenerative power of violence. Moreover, the ease with which his materialist ontology slips into a sociological dualism wherein “goodness” becomes violence inflicted upon the political enemy seems to me disconcertingly symptomatic of the certain tendencies of the revolutionary Left.

Many contemporary theorists, however, seek to avoid all such dualistic oppositions by emphasizing radical immanence and contingency, and thus denying that “goodness” as such is a meaningful moral category. Since Richard Rorty is among the most prominent and sophisticated American examples of this tendency, his *Philosophy and Social Hope* merits some extended consideration. The book begins with several statements about the nature of moral choice that are, in certain ways, quite consistent with the view I have been advocating. He writes that American pragmatists such as himself describe “moral choice as always a matter of compromise between competing goods, rather than as a choice between the absolutely right and the absolutely wrong” (xxviii). Consequently, he argues that “evil is merely a lesser good” (xxix). I have already claimed that a major stream of the Christian theological tradition holds that every desire is a desire for some good and that radical evil does not exist. Thus far, Rorty is in agreement; however, his contention that the choice between lesser and greater goods is therefore not “a choice between the absolutely right and the absolutely wrong” contains within it the seed of a serious error. If this merely means that those who perpetrate evil deeds are human beings who have their own motivations, which can theoretically be described in terms of a disordered desire for some lesser good (say, the good of enjoying material prosperity) over-against some greater good (say, loving a

neighbor), then the statement is fine. But if it means economic exploitation is not “absolutely wrong,” then I must dissent from this judgment.

What lies behind Rorty’s denial of absolute rights and wrongs is his broader insistence that contemporary thinkers “must abandon the traditional philosophical project of finding something stable which will serve as a criterion for judging the transitory products of our transitory needs and interests” as well as “the idea that there are unconditional, transcultural moral obligations” (xvi). Rorty states correctly that this radical insistence upon the socio-cultural contingency of human thought—together with its rejection of a whole host of dualisms (spirit/matter, reality/appearance, inside/outside) inherited from thinkers such as Plato, Descartes, and Kant—unites American pragmatists in the tradition of James and Dewey with a host of European philosophers in the tradition of Nietzsche who are often labeled “postmodern” (xvi).²⁵ Since he has rejected the dualistic opposition between reality and appearance, he claims “the idea that we should pursue truth for its own sake” is meaningless (xxv). The goal of intellectual activity, according to Rorty, is not uncovering a hidden reality or getting in touch with extra-linguistic truth, but rather moving towards beliefs (which he defines as habits of action) which we find more useful. When this mode of thinking is applied to morality, “evil” simply means “inexpedient” (xxix). Conversely, “there is no distinction of kind between what is useful and what is right” (73). Thus, for Rorty the

²⁵ In the American pragmatist tradition, Rorty identifies James, Dewey, Kuhn, Quine, Putnam, and Davidson as leading lights; in the European tradition he nominate Heidegger, Sartre, Gadamer, Derrida, and Foucault (xix). Rorty also notes that figures in both traditions are labeled relativists, subjectivists, and social constructionists, though he prefers negative terms such as anti-dualists, anti-Platonists, and anti-foundationalists. On the differences between these two traditions, Rorty claims (somewhat dubiously) that the American tradition has succeeded to a greater degree in tearing down the boundaries between the kind of thought that is called “philosophical” and the kind of thought at work in such disciplines as literary criticism and the hard sciences (xx-xxi).

moral choice between lesser and greater goods boils down to the pragmatic task of discerning which choice seems more likely to promote human happiness.

This way of framing moral decision-making has several difficulties, including the problems of how one is supposed to determine which goods are most conducive to human happiness, and—perhaps more importantly—which humans one is supposed to desire to be happy. As for the latter question, Rorty argues vigorously that moral progress involves expanding our natural sense of familial bonds in order to cultivate sensibilities that cause us to desire the happiness of a greater and greater percentage of humanity.²⁶ The goal, then, “is a matter of increasing responsiveness to the needs of a larger and larger variety of people and things” (81). This is, in my view, an admirable goal. But, given Rorty’s presuppositions, why is this his goal? To his credit, Rorty repeatedly acknowledges that he prefers inclusivity and tolerance to their alternatives because his proclivities are shaped by a European cultural inheritance that has been shaped by Christianity. He writes: “Christianity has taught the West to look forward to a world in which . . . all men and women are brothers and sisters” (79-80). However, he also asserts that “the vocabulary of Greek metaphysics and Christian theology—the vocabulary used in what Heidegger has called ‘the onto-theological tradition’—was a useful one for our ancestors’ purposes, but that *we* have different purposes” (xxii). Though I am tempted to point out that such phenomena as “blood feuds”—which he names as one of the undesirable legacies of the onto-theological tradition—are incompatible with Christian social ethics, but lingering on this point might obscure the

²⁶ In a similar vein, Luc Ferry’s recent book, *On Love: A Philosophy for the Twenty-First Century*, advocates a secularized conception of love as the basis for human life and existence. He advocates for starting with the strong social bonds associated with familial attachment and then pursuing an ever-greater extension of the concept of family to include the whole human community.

more important consideration that, on his own principles, Rorty's argument will not be convincing unless he shows us that his anti-foundationalist, pragmatic ethics can give us a more *useful* way of achieving his admirable goals of "diminishing human suffering and increasing human equality, increasing the ability of all human children to start life with an equal chance of happiness" (xxix). In short, Rorty's whole project requires him to make a convincing case that the preferential, utilitarian language of pragmatism is a more useful tool for obtaining universal peace and justice than the language of Christian theology.

And on this point, he is terribly unconvincing. According to Rorty, his pragmatist presuppositions require him to replace statements like "God wills us to welcome the stranger within our gates" with statements like "hospitality is one of the virtues upon which our community prides itself" (85). Similarly, the phrase "respect for human rights demand our intervention to save the Jews from the Nazis" really just means "that a failure to intervene would make *us* uncomfortable with ourselves" (85). Of course, the morally vacuous statements of cultural preference with which Rorty paraphrases traditional moral imperatives would not apply to someone like Corrie Ten Boom, for whom saving Jews from Nazis meant trading the mild discomfort of yielding her conscience to the perverse moral preferences of her culture for the severe physical discomforts of torture in a concentration camp. Nor do I find it likely that Dietrich Bonhoeffer and other members of the Christian resistance to Nazism in Germany would have risked their lives to stand in solidarity with the Jews on the basis that it makes them feel uncomfortable not to do so. Indeed, if one has been formed by a culture that believes—perhaps, not without reason—that the happiness of its members is best served

by the annihilation or enslavement of outsiders, then one is very unlikely to find compelling the insistence of an American pragmatist that the ultimately-groundless sensibilities of post-Christian European culture are very preferable to all other alternatives.

Of course, it is important not to deny the countless failures of German Christians during the Nazi regime. The overwhelming majority of the church capitulated to the demonic ideology of the times, and the faithful witness of a small number of martyrs does not negate the church's responsibility to own up to its complicity with genocide. Christians must repent and keep repenting of this atrocity. But the fact that overwhelming ideological pressures had the capacity to compel the vast majority of Germans in the early twentieth century to capitulate to a regime perpetrating horrors should alert us to the possibility that evil is a force to be reckoned with, and resisting its powers may require something more sturdy than statements to the affect that "we pride ourselves in acting according to Christian principles that we no longer believe." While it is a tragedy that so few Christians were willing to give their lives opposing Nazi evil, it should not be ignored that *some* did so. Their Christian vision had the power to compel them to die so that others might live, even in the face of a culture that said "ethnic purity is one of the traits upon which our community prides itself." I am simply suggesting that an individual, committed to her own happiness, would be unlikely to find persuasive pragmatic grounds for making such a sacrifice.

This point comes out even more clearly when one takes into consideration Rorty's own celebration of the American Civil Rights movement. He calls leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. martyrs and complains that American children are not taught

that social justice in America owes a great deal to the enormous self-sacrifice of practitioners of civil disobedience (257). This is a point well made. But then, it should be said that King repeatedly stated his own self-sacrifice was sustained by his deep convictions regarding the moral structure of the universe as revealed in the incarnation and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Moreover, it would seem that the entire Civil Rights movement—with its incessant and unapologetic tendency to preach biblical sermons to national audiences—gives the lie to Rorty’s argument that religious claims should be precluded from the public sphere because they are always and inevitably conversation stoppers (Rorty 168-174). This observation makes even more exasperating Rorty’s claim that the “Supreme Court, invoking [the] idea of equal protection, began the great moral revival we know [as] the Civil Rights Movement” (246-7). In fact, even a cursory study of this “great moral revival” makes it clear that American courts and legislative bodies only granted equal protection to African Americans after they were compelled to do so by the tectonic shift of values brought about through the sacrificial suffering of people who believed (and said) they were walking down a road to freedom with cosmic companionship.²⁷

It would seem, then, that even if one were to grant Rorty’s contention that the worth of the Christian tradition must be assessed solely in terms of pragmatic use value (which I do not) while sharing Rorty’s conviction that universal justice and equality is an admirable goal (which I do, precisely because I am an adherent to the Christian

²⁷ For excellent introductions to this history, see Taylor Branch’s beautifully written and meticulously well-researched trilogy—*Parting the Waters : America in the King Years, 1954-63*; *Pillar of Fire : America in the King Years, 1963-65*; and *At Canaan's Edge: America in the King Years, 1965-68*—as well as David L. Chappelle’s provocative and important book, *A Stone of Hope: Prophetic Religion and the Death of Jim Crow*, which corrects secular misappropriations of the Civil Rights movement by focusing analysis on the role of religion at the movement’s center.

tradition from which Rorty admits that he has acquired these social hopes), there are no obvious reasons to accept the suggestion that the language and logic of pragmatism has greater use-value for achieving these goals. As a Christian, I am not interested in arguing that belief in God is *useful* because I do not think that God is a means to some other end. However, granting Rorty's premises for the sake of argument, it remains the case that the denial of trans-cultural right and wrong seems like a pretty unconvincing way to get people to sacrifice their personal and cultural values for the "greater good" of universal justice and equality.

To state this more pointedly, Rorty's proposal that we all leave behind the concept of moral duty in favor of talking about the values that our communities prefer seems like a hollow and naïve form of liberalism that is unlikely either to inspire self-sacrifice for the good of others or resist in any compelling way the powerful ideological forces that shore up various forms of oppression. With regard to this kind of liberalism, Terry Eagleton asks a valid question: "How can a creed which turns its eyes in civilized distaste from what is truly diabolical in humanity hope to vanquish it?" (69). The answer to Eagleton's rhetorical question seems, to me, clear: "It cannot." In fact, there seems to be some justification for Miroslav Volf's feisty assertion that replacing moral imperatives with the kind of talk about communal preferences that Rorty advocates "may be all that people desire who are spoiled by affluence, because it legitimizes their narcissistic obsession with 'creating their private self-images' and 'reweaving their webs of belief and desire'" (68).²⁸ However, such weak forms of moral discourse are

²⁸ A powerful illustration of this point is apparent in Emmanuel Katongole's "Postmodern Illusions and the Challenges of African Theology: The Ecclesial Tactics of Resistance." Katongole writes that he was initially drawn to postmodern theory, because its attack on eurocentrism and oppressive cultural narratives seemed to create new possibilities for inclusion of African voices in theology, philosophy, and

“not what people suffering hunger, persecution, and oppression can afford. . . . For they know that they can survive only if judgment is passed against those who exploit, persecute, and oppress them” (68). I do not doubt the sincerity with which Rorty desires inclusivity, tolerance, and justice for all, nor do I question his personal willingness to sacrifice for the good of others. However, I agree with Volf that Rorty’s proposals—such as dropping categories like right and wrong and banishing religious argument from public political discourse—look like a dubious assertion of his own pragmatist values that cannot be justified pragmatically. On the contrary, if utility is the only valid criteria, then the prophetic vigor of the Civil Rights movement seems to provide a much more powerful way of crying out for justice and equity in the public sphere.

2.7. Learning the Language of Lament

My early encounters with abject evil in the course of day-to-day pastoral ministry mostly had the effect of stoking the fires of my moral outrage. My sense of solidarity with the oppressed was growing in proportion to my bitter resentment towards their oppressors. But further experience helped me to see that I was working with an overly simplistic framework that divided the world too neatly into “good people” and “bad people.” Of course, my theological roots compelled me to say that all humans are sinners in need of God’s grace. Nonetheless, daily experiences in which I witnessed neighbors and friends suffering needlessly due to the self-seeking decisions of others

politics. However, he eventually determined that postmodern theory, by saying that no form of discourse has claims to extra-cultural moral authority, made the prophetic witness of Africans just as meaningless as everything else. In the ends, Katongole concluded that postmodern theory does the same work as postmodern neoliberal capitalism: eroding the communal ties and cultural values that provide Africans with their only means of power and identity. He calls on the church to develop tactics of resistance that can fend off the destructive illusion of postmodernism’s “playful nihilism.”

made it easy for me subconsciously to sort the world into innocent and guilty, righteous and wicked. The more I lived and thought, however, the harder it became either to find someone who was thoroughly innocent or to identify any act of cruelty that was not perpetrated by a person with inherent human dignity. In fact, I found a disturbing amount of good in the “bad people” and bad in the “good people.” Of course, such discoveries do nothing to excuse evil actions or mitigate their disastrous affects, but my experiences were forcing me to reconsider what I thought about justice and the possibilities of social redemption. Whereas my simpler presuppositions had at least possessed the power of fanning my angry zeal to resist the injustices that I was witnessing on a regular basis, I was now learning to move past anger into grief and contrition, which in turn led me—somewhat surprisingly—into new possibilities of hope, compassion, and creative action. In retrospect, it is clear to me that I was learning an ancient spiritual discipline with deep biblical roots, the discipline of lament.

I was provoked to begin thinking more seriously about lament at a 2012 national conference of the Christian Community Development Association, a network of churches, nonprofits, and individuals doing grassroots work in under-resourced neighborhoods throughout the United States. At the conference Emmanuel Katongole, a Roman Catholic priest from Uganda, and Chris Rice, a Protestant from the United States with a long history of Civil Rights activism, co-delivered a lecture on the theology and spirituality of reconciliation. After expounding on Paul’s teaching in 2 Corinthians 5:16-21 about the reconciling grace of God, Katongole and Rice began telling personal stories about their experience of grief, forgiveness, and healing in the midst of profound hatred and violence. In the course of these reflections, they talked

about the necessity of learning from the scriptures how to lament, which they define as the hard work of learning to see and name the world's brokenness. Their argument in this talk, as in their book, *Reconciling All Things*, was that a failure to lament causes us to have a superficial understanding of the problems in the world and to propose quick, inadequate solutions to these problems. Conversely, the "discipline of lament not only allows us to see the depth of the world's brokenness (including our own and the church's complicity in it); it also shapes reconciliation as a journey that involves truth, conversion and forgiveness" (149). These words, which I heard delivered in person in 2012, resonated both with my reading of scripture and with my ongoing experience of life in a world filled with pain. For several years before hearing Katongole and Rice, my simplistic understanding of what's wrong with the world and how to fix it had been slowly giving way to a profound grief for and with my neighbors, an increasing awareness of my own complicity in the world's problems, and an ever-deepening commitment to the slow, patient, collaborative work of pursuing change.

An emerging theology of lament gave me a framework to understand what I had been learning, for example, from my interactions with a drug-dealer named John, whom everybody in my neighborhood called "Crazy." My resentment towards this young man had grown over the course of several years and reached a tipping point when my next-door neighbor told me in tears that Crazy had been giving her fourteen-year-old son free methamphetamines in order to hook him into the drug-life. Shortly after this conversation, I stepped out my front door one afternoon to see Crazy loudly berating his son, a kid with a remarkably sweet disposition who loved to attend the neighborhood after-school program I lead with my wife, though his father rarely let him come. My

first reaction to Crazy's verbal assault of this child was a surge of anger, combined with an irrational impulse to grab a baseball bat and go beat the fear of God into the man who continued to terrorize my community despite the best efforts of police.

Thankfully, this impulse gave way to prayer, and I found myself standing in the front yard, crying out angrily. My prayer, in the tenor of biblical lament, was something along the lines of an accusation: "God, if you don't do something fast to change this situation, what's going to happen to that innocent kid?" In a rare moment of moral and spiritual clarity, answering words popped into my head: "He will turn out just like his father. And how do you think that his dad became that way?" After this moment, I could not stop imagining John (who had suddenly regained his given name in my mind) as a child, and I wondered about the process of pain and exploitation that had forged him into the man whom everyone now called "Crazy." I was still angry, but now I also felt a deep sense of grief for the pain that must have characterized John's whole life story. This experience of pain brought along with it an awareness that I had long ago stopped seeing John as a human being with inherent dignity, and the waning of my self-righteous anger made room for a small sense of hope that John could be redeemable. I resolved to befriend him. Over the next few months, I made an effort—despite the persistence of my less creditable impulses—to treat John like a decent man, ask him questions about his life, and challenge him to take seriously his influence for good and ill on the rising generation in our community. John started having serious conversations with me, opening up about his life, and expressing a vague desire for a different way of relating to the world.

I eventually lost contact with John when my family moved from his neighborhood into a low-income apartment complex where we were helping to start some new community work. But a year or two later, he unexpectedly reappeared while I was having a rather unsuccessful conversation with an eighteen-year-old who lived in our new complex. This bright young woman was in the process of a grueling rehab regimen in an attempt to learn how to walk again after being shot in the head in a gang-related incident. I feared that the window of opportunity to intervene in her life would close as soon as she was physically capable of returning to her previous routine, and I had been trying to cultivate a relationship with her for several weeks, to little avail. In the midst of my conversation, John walked up behind me. The young woman brightened to see him, John brightened to see me, and I was dumbstruck to see John's radically changed demeanor and appearance. He excitedly told me he had finished some vocational schooling and was going to make a better life for himself and his family. He then turned to the young woman and said, gesturing in my direction, "This is good people. I've known him for years, and you need to listen to what he is telling you." John was a man whom she respected, and her attitude towards me instantly changed. About fifteen minutes later, I left that conversation feeling like I was in the middle of a spiritual paradigm shift. John had helped me to see the presence of evil impulses in myself and the presence of good in a person that I had mentally demonized. He had also left me with the impression that redemption involves moving from anger to grief, contrition, and creative action. In a roundabout way, John had been teaching me the discipline of lament.

Over time, I have become convinced that this discipline—naming evil, grieving, repenting, and re-committing to the work of building a better world—is of vital importance not only as a personal practice, but also as a means to communal transformation. This is particularly important when the evils being encountered are systemic and structural rather than merely personal. I was reminded of this recently while participating in a prayer vigil for racial reconciliation in Oklahoma City. The vigil was prompted by an incident in which a white police officer shot and killed an unarmed black man named Terence Crutcher in Tulsa, Oklahoma.²⁹ The incident made national headlines and stirred up memories of the Tulsa race riot of 1921, which was one of the most brutal and deadly events in the long, bloody history of U.S. race relations.³⁰ In the days following the death of Terence Crutcher, African American members of my congregation began expressing their sense of frustration, anger, and confusion about how to respond to the nation’s ongoing dysfunctional relations between black communities and the police. I also got a phone call from an African American member of the Oklahoma City Police Department, who asked me to pray that his fellow officers would be open to his training on how implicit racial bias affects their interactions with the community. In response to these circumstances, Chauncey Shillow, my African American co-pastor at Christ Community Church, decided to invite Christians from around Oklahoma City to a prayer vigil called “Outcry.” The name was based upon Psalm 34:17, “The Lord hears his people when they cry out to him for help,” and Chauncey summoned the faith community to take God at his word by crying out for justice and reconciliation.

²⁹ An episode of *60 Minutes*—“Officer Betty Shelby breaks silence on Terence Crutcher shooting”—tells the story of this incident with interviews of Crutcher’s sister and the officer who shot him.

³⁰ See James S. Hirsch’s harrowing *Riot and Remembrance: America’s Worst Race Riot and its Legacy*.

By necessity, the event was thrown together in a short period of time. Scheduling problems were many, and less than two hundred people showed up at the vigil. Those present were a racially diverse group from several congregations. Among those present were about a dozen white and Latino pastors who came to support and learn from the black Christian leaders in their city. Chauncey and a team of black pastors from several churches began the service with prayer, and then invited those present to heed scripture's called to "weep with those who weep" (Rom. 12:15) and "bear one another's burdens" (Gal. 6:2). These pastors talked about the tragic death of Terence Crutcher, who was created in the image of God. They talked about the pain of Crutcher's family and friends. They talked about the anger, frustration, and fear that many in the black community feel when they watch these kinds of events on the news. Then they led those assembled in a minute of silence, inviting them to enter into the grief of God's children.

After this time of silence, the crowd was pensive, sober, and serious. Then Chauncey said:

The scriptures are filled with laments that teach us how to bring our pain before God in prayer. When we lament, we name the brokenness of the world that we live in, including the sinfulness of our own hearts. The Bible invites us to do this in a way that is honest to God about our grief, anger, and pain. But biblical lament also teaches us that we do not have to grieve without hope. We remember that there is always hope because Jesus died for us and rose again. We remember that Jesus has given us his Spirit and that Jesus will return again to make all creation new.³¹

Chauncey called several African American Christians forward to lead those present in responsive reading of biblical laments. The first reader spoke the words of Psalm 94:3-4: "O LORD, how long shall the wicked, how long shall the wicked exult? They pour

³¹ Quotations are from a transcript of the evening's program.

out their arrogant words; all the evildoers boast.” Then the room began to fill with emotion as everyone present read verse 5 together: “They crush your people, O Lord, they afflict your heritage.” Black voices in front of me were releasing pent up frustration and pain. A white voice beside me trembled in a way that seemed to suggest a growing awareness that this problem was his problem too. A few rows behind me stood a Latino pastor, in whose office Chauncey and I had recently spent several hours discussing how our congregations could challenge our state’s xenophobic, anti-immigrant attitudes and advocate for comprehensive immigration reform. For this pastor to read these words aloud was an act of spiritual communion in a shared struggle. A few minutes later, the same voices rang out with increasing intensity as the words of Lamentations 3 moved from “Remember my affliction and my wanderings, the wormwood and the gall!” to “But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end.” Shared grief was mingling with the beginnings of shared hope.

During the course of the vigil, this movement between grief and hope continued. An African American high school teacher and basketball coach in our neighborhood told those assembled about his experience growing up in Tulsa, how afraid he was every time he was pulled over by police. He reminded those present of the brutal legacy of the Tulsa race riots and said that many of the same racial attitudes that broke out violently in 1921 are still part of the daily reality in Tulsa. After this teacher set down, Chauncey led the congregation in a time of self-examination and repentance for latent prejudices and for apathy regarding the injustices in our community. He challenged all present to renew their personal commitment to be a part of the solution to our state’s

problems. He also gave time for those assembled to write on notecards their own personal laments for the ongoing racial inequities in the state of Oklahoma.

Then the service swung back to the theme of hope. Several more black Christians led the assembly in responsive readings of scriptures about God's healing justice and love. They facilitated congregational prayers for racial reconciliation in the churches of Oklahoma and for restorative justice in institutions throughout the state. As the vigil drew to its conclusion, Chauncey invited those present to turn over the notecards on which they had written their personal laments. On the opposite side of the cards, they wrote down their hopes and dreams for a better racial future in Oklahoma. In single file, the congregation brought their cards to the alter of the church as a way of presenting their laments and their hopes to God. As the vigil drew to a close, we turned out the lights and held up candles while singing "Amazing Grace." Chauncey exhorted everyone present to carry the light of God's justice and reconciling love back into the world as they left the sanctuary.

The vigil was a small event. Oklahoma City's schools did not suddenly become desegregated, nor did the doors of our city jail swing open so that men and women of color who were locked up for petty offences could go free. The next Sunday, everyone went back to their own congregations, most of which are ethnically and socio-economically homogeneous. Still, I cannot shake the feeling that the pastors in that little church led all the rest of us into an experience with significant ramifications, not only for our personal lives, but also for our community. A couple of days after the vigil, I received a text message from a black college student who was present and wanted my advice about calling African Americans from Oklahoma City together to dream

collaboratively about building a city filled with “color, culture, and Christ.” After two more days, a young white pastor told me that since the vigil he had been praying that God would help him to feel more deeply the pain that his black brothers and sisters feel every day. A week later, I received an email from another white pastor who wanted to offer his help with a new project to start an alternative school for inner city kids who are not flourishing in the city’s under-performing public school district. The discipline of lament did not suddenly transform our city, but it did continue a process of teaching people to see and grieve for the pervasive evil in their communities, to see and celebrate the even deeper reality of beauty and hope in their communities, and to recommit themselves to creative action. Lamenting together blew a few bricks out of the walls that isolate people in our city based on demographic difference. It brought people together for a moment of shared suffering and shared hope. In so doing, it continued the moral and spiritual work of preparing participants for the long, slow, arduous, collaborative effort that will be necessary to bring about lasting change.

Experiencing this prayer vigil—a collective act of lament and hope—brought to my mind an address of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, called “Our Way According to the Testimony of Scripture,” which was delivered on October 26, 1938 to the “Illegal Young Brothers,” a group of pastors who had heeded Bonhoeffer’s call not to apply for legalization of their ministries by the Nazi-coopted German national church. In the midst of social evils that included political opposition to those churches who would not capitulate to the Third Reich, Bonhoeffer begins the address by stating his intention to provoke “serious reflection and renewed joy over the way of the church of Jesus Christ” (168). He does this by reflecting on biblical passages about the nature of the Body of

Christ, because, in his words, “Only Holy Scripture can guide our reflections aright and give us utter joy and confidence” (168). Towards the end of this address, he briefly touches on a controversy about whether it is appropriate to speak of suffering in “Christian solidarity” with those who are oppressed: “The word [‘solidarity’] is not important here. We speak of active and Christian love. It is so remarkable that we theologians keep forgetting that our obedience to Jesus Christ also demands simple, Christian love to our brothers in office, to those who suffer, and to those who are in the front line” (171). To be a Christian is to love those who are suffering, to enter their pain. Bonhoeffer illustrates this point by reflecting: “We ought also to remember the cry of the prisoner Paul to Timothy, to come to Rome to him, to suffering, not to be ashamed of his fetters but to suffer with him. ‘Suffer with’—that is in the end what 2 Timothy is all about—and it is the last appeal we have from the Apostle Paul. So much for the question of ‘solidarity’” (171). The discipline of lament is a way to heed this last appeal from Paul to “suffer with.” Lament causes us to see, name, and grieve for the evils in the world and in our own souls, but to do so in a way that leads to joy and active love.

2.8. Evil, Lament, and Hope

This chapter has sought to commend the wisdom of an ancient Christian way of thinking about evil. On one hand, evil is pervasive: corrupting and perverting God’s good creation, turning humanity’s best capacities into instruments of self-destructive, arbitrary power. As such, evil looms large in the world as a monstrous force with the power to destroy life. On the other hand, evil is itself not a substance. It lacks independent existence and creative power. It can only deface that which is good, and all

of God's creation is good. These two sides of thinking about evil guard against a naïve optimism and a despairing pessimism. To embrace this Christian way of thinking about evil requires the discipline of searching it out, naming it, and turning from it. This involves self-examination and repentance, but it also involves the hard work of thoughtful social criticism. Both of these fall under the rubric of what I have called the discipline of lament. Lament calls evil "evil," and the judgment is based not upon personal or cultural preference, but upon the word of God. The judgment is not carried out in a spirit of triumphalist judgmentalism, for the same word of God pronounces judgment upon the evils of the one who is doing the lamenting. This reality guards against the personal and political temptation to demonize one's enemies while too-quickly approving of one's own goals and methods.

Lament involves grief—mourning for one's own complicity in the world's evils and consciously choosing to suffer with those who endure injustice—but its end is hope and creative action. This is because God's word of judgment is always proclaimed alongside God's word of grace. The totality of creation—for all of its corruption and sin—participates essentially in the goodness of God, and the Creator is graciously at work in the world, sowing seeds of *shalom*. God's words of judgment and grace invite those who hear them to turn from sin, to be transformed, and to become agents of God's transforming peace. The life of repentance is a life of continual turning towards God in Christ, which means continually renewing one's commitment to oppose injustice and pursue God's good purposes for creation.

This last point brings to light one of the most important implications of construing evil as privation from the perspective of cultural theory. It is not enough to

name evils; one must also do the risky work of naming goods. Just as evil depends upon the ontological priority of goodness, so the work of cultural criticism depends upon some conceptions of the cultural goods that are being twisted and corrupted by evil. If criticism is to have a redemptive role in human society, then critics should be explicit about the goods that are implicitly being commended when evils are denounced. To come at this point from another angle, cultural critics need to continue doing the work of imagining a better world. This better world, however conceived, is the end towards which social hopes are directed, and criticism without hope leads to despair, which is a surefire way to maintain the status quo that one is criticizing. The next chapter explores what is necessary to do the imaginative theological work of envisioning a better world. While taking into account the doctrine of sin and the complexities of Christian eschatological hope, I argue that Christian's need to cultivate a biblically-rooted social imagination that dreams of justice and love in order to guide and sustain the church's peace-making work in the world.

3. Justice

3.1. Justice and Beloved Community

On the evening of August 20, 2016, about fifty sweaty pilgrims sprawled on the pews of St. Stephen's Church of God in Christ, a historic African American congregation in San Diego, California. We had begun the day at San Diego's border with Tijuana, Mexico, where we worshiped, prayed, and learned from Latino Christian leaders about the plight of undocumented migrants who come to the United States from Mexico and Central America. We heard stories about people trying to enter the U.S. in order to feed their children, then dying in the desert from heat exhaustion and dehydration. After walking the first eight miles on our journey from Tijuana to Los Angeles—an act of solidarity with immigrants and an effort to draw public attention to the need for comprehensive immigration reform—we were now receiving the hospitality of a congregation well known for its preaching, its neighborhood ministries, and its courageous Civil Rights advocacy.

The Rev. Dr. George McKinney, who founded the church in 1962, welcomed us with quotations from Edmund Burke and the prophet Amos: “A great British philosopher once said that the only prerequisite for the triumph of evil is that good people do nothing. You are good people, and you've decided to do something—express your concern that justice will roll down like water.”³² Most of us in the pews felt less like “good people” than “desperate people” seeking some creative outlet for our concerns in light of the xenophobia and anti-immigrant passions at the center of the political chaos of 2016. Nonetheless, there were enough heirs of the Civil Rights

³² Quotations from a video recording that I made during McKinney's comments, which is available online at <https://youtu.be/dCIZvB37Uug>.

movement present among the bedraggled walkers to stir up an “Amen!” and some heartfelt groans of approval in response to the phrase “justice will roll down like water,” an allusion to Amos 5:25, the most frequently cited biblical text by Civil Rights leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. and John M. Perkins.

McKinney’s goal wasn’t to stir up our emotions, however. His deep voice and rhetorical powers were not aiming to whip us into a frenzy, but to prepare us for the long, slow, painful walk down the path of justice, which would continue long after our present pilgrimage was over. After expressing his personal commitment to pursuing “justice in the immigration policies of our nation” as well as his “deep concern for unaccompanied minors who are coming into the country at great risk,” McKinney’s slow, deliberate words returned to the familiar language of the Civil Rights movement: “The ‘beloved community’ that Martin Luther King talked about can be experienced, but it requires sacrifice and suffering and commitment. And I believe that that’s expressed here by this march for justice, peace, and racial reconciliation.” These abstracts concepts—justice, peace, reconciliation, “beloved community”—were familiar enough, but they seemed to acquire fresh urgency as the evening’s program moved forward.

We pilgrims listened to harrowing testimonials about the tens of thousands of children from Central America whom the U.S. refuses to grant asylum every year, despite the fact that these kids have traveled thousands of miles alone, on foot, in an attempt to escape the warlords who rule their communities with iron fists. One activist shared a story about a boy whose fingertips had been cut off after he told a recruiter for the local drug cartel, “I won’t work for you because I love God.” Following this

encounter, the boy fled for his life to the U.S., but a judge rejected his request for asylum on the grounds that he lacked sufficient evidence that his life was in eminent danger. In fact, 93 percent of such requests are rejected for children who are not represented by a lawyer (Santos).

For the pilgrims at St. Stephens Church, these sickening stories were being received and interpreted through a spiritual and theological grid evoked by Rev. McKinney's brief opening comments. The two words "beloved community" are perhaps the most enduring theological contribution of Martin Luther King Jr. These words describe the eschatological end that God intends for creation, an end characterized not merely by the absence of violence or oppression but by the presence of relationships of love.³³ They signify comprehensive communal flourishing. For King, letting "justice roll down like waters" entails moving from social relations characterized by hatred, exploitation, and indifference towards new social relations characterized by friendship, respect, and mutual care. Though the full instantiation of beloved community awaits the return of Jesus, it can be experienced in the present as a gift of the Spirit, a sign that God's kingdom is already at work in the world. But this experience, as Rev. McKinney reminded us, requires a commitment to suffer for justice and truth. When a couple of teenagers made their way to the front of the sanctuary to tell us how they had walked from Guatemala to the United States years before, they were joining McKinney and King by inviting us to a new kind of spiritual communion

³³ For an innovative elaboration on the concept of "beloved community" that includes historical analysis, constructive theology, and social theory, see Charles March, *The Beloved Community: How Faith Shapes Social Justice*. Kenneth L. Smith and Ira G. Zepp Jr.'s *Search for the Beloved Community: The Thinking of Martin Luther King Jr.* remains a valuable contribution to understanding the background and implications of King's thought on this topic.

that would involve shared pain, shared joy, and shared struggle against the dehumanizing power of evil. They reminded us that the work of “doing justice” is sustained by self-giving love and aimed towards beloved community.

In this chapter, I develop a biblical theology of justice for our times, which is inextricably connected to the themes of resisting evil and pursuing peace. My argument begins by contrasting the dominant modes of thinking about justice in the Western philosophical tradition with two Christian approaches to justice developed in the late twentieth-century—“restorative justice” and “just peacemaking”—which have already begun to exert significant influence. I then consider several arguments by theologians and secular cultural theorists that the concept of justice should not have a central role in social ethics. The rest of the chapter is spent developing a constructive biblical theology of justice that takes the most important criticisms of the concept into account while demonstrating important points of tension between biblical justice and the dominant models of the Western tradition. The chapter’s final section brings these abstract ideas back into contact with the concrete struggles of the church in the twenty-first century, with an emphasis upon local engagements with the global crisis of mass migration by people who have been displaced through violence and poverty. My central claim, developed throughout the chapter, is that Christian disciples are called to a lifestyle of justice that entails actively, creatively pursuing communal flourishing in a way that faithfully responds to the church’s experience of the judgment and grace of God. The paradigms of “restorative justice” and “just peacemaking” resonate with this account of justice in ways that dominant strands of the Western philosophical tradition do not. However, I also suggest some ways in which these welcome new paradigms need to be

augmented in order to give a more thorough and adequate account for how biblical justice should be embodied in the daily praxis of the contemporary church.

3.2. Justice in Western Philosophy and Contemporary Christian Theology

The dominant concept associated with justice in the Western philosophical tradition is captured in the Latin tag line *suum cuique tribuere*, “to allocate to each his own” (Barry and Matrayvers 141). According to this tradition, justice is a matter of issuing rewards and punishments, benefits and burdens, in a way that corresponds to the desserts of those who receive them. The concept is classically represented by the personified image of Lady Justice, who holds a scale in one hand (with which to weigh merits and demerits) and a sword in the other (with which to dole out fitting retributions) while a blindfold covers here eyes (signifying impartiality). A commitment to justice, according to this mainstream tradition, should be played out in the quotidian, everyday affairs of interpersonal relationships. For example, a just person gives compliments and rebukes to his or her acquaintances in accordance with truth (and, ideally, prudence) rather than insincerely flattering some and excessively criticizing others. A just parent rewards and corrects children according to their attitudes and behavior, rather than merely doing what seems expedient in the moment. A just employer pays fair wages, rewards excellent work, and treats employees in a way that befits their dignity as human persons. But justice is also about more than personal behavior and interpersonal relationships. It is about the structures, customs, and laws of human communities.

Consider, for example, the three examples of justice displayed in interpersonal relationship that I have just given. Each of these involves progressively larger and more complex relational configurations. Compliments and rebukes may be allocated to individual acquaintances on an individual basis, but the parent of several children must fairly deal with competing interests and a complex tangle of relational dynamics, while the leader of a large corporation may need to establish policies and procedures that fairly treat thousands of employees with a wide variety of roles, qualifications, and needs. To determine what justice requires becomes more difficult as one considers the proper allocation of rewards, punishments, benefits, and burdens within wider spheres of interlocking social networks. In the United States, for instance, legislators must make decisions that inevitably affect millions of unknown citizens with competing values and interests as well as billions of persons from other nations. To be a citizen of the United States—with the potential to vote, to affect public opinion, and to influence elected officials—enmeshes one inevitably in complex networks of social power that will necessarily be exerted in ways that are more or less just on the terms of this classical definition. If one makes an effort to eschew this power—say, by, not voting and refraining from all conversations related to public policies or competing public values—this decision remains a culpable act of refraining to use the power that one nonetheless possesses. To raise moral questions about the right way to use (or refrain from using) the varying degrees of power that almost all humans possess in relation to other persons and institutions is to begin thinking about justice. Thus, as Brian Barry and Matt Matravers rightly put it, the concept of justice is not only “a necessary virtue of individuals in their interactions with others” but also “the principle virtue of social

institutions” (141). Since all human life and behavior is enmeshed in a fabric of complex social relations, moral philosophers in the Western tradition have generally held that serious effort to determine the requirements of justice and act accordingly is an essential aspect of the moral life.

Precisely this effort to think seriously about justice in relation to various complex social configurations has led intellectuals to parse the concept into a variety of well-known subcategories. Whereas *distributive* justice generally refers to the fair dissemination of resources and benefits within a social group, *retributive* justice is concerned with determining if, when, how, and by whom wrongdoers should be punished. Fair payment for goods and services as well as the fulfillment of contractual obligations fall under the banner of *commutative* justice. And *procedural* justice—rather than focusing exclusively on what benefits, burdens, punishments, or rewards may be allocated to whom—is concerned with ensuring that the process by which such decisions are made is itself fair. Though several other common terms could be introduced, this brief description of various aspects of the concept justice in traditional and contemporary moral theory already reveals both its complexity and its relevance to a host of decisions that are constantly being made at every level of social life.³⁴

Throughout the Western tradition, theorists of justice have sought to root the concept in various soils, including divine will, natural law, and the social contract. For example, in *A Theory of Justice*, John Rawls—the most influential contemporary philosopher to write on the topic—develops an account of distributive justice based on social contract theory. Rawls takes as his starting point that theorists of justice should

³⁴ For more detailed introductions to these and related terms, see Barry and Matravers (141-143) and Hooker (456-457).

imagine themselves in an “original position”—behind a “veil of ignorance”—with a basic understanding of such topics as economics, psychology, and the natural sciences, but with no knowledge of their own personal histories or place in society. From this position of purported impartiality—another form of the blindfold of Lady Justice—Rawls proceeds to describe his views about what kind of society individuals in this “original position” would want to inhabit. The society that he imagines is governed by two principles. First, “each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive basic liberty compatible with a similar liberty for others” (60). According to this principle, a just society is first and foremost one that protects the “rights” of its individual members, and the most basic right is negative liberty, the unhindered ability to choose. To this Rawls adds a second, more complex, principle, to the effect that economic benefits should be allocated in a way that (with certain qualifications and caveats) is aimed towards benefitting the least-advantaged members of society, and that offices and positions of power must be open to all in a way that guards fair equality of opportunity. Though Rawls theory is but one of many—and it has many critics as well as supporters—it clearly represents a major strand of contemporary culture. Justice, here, is a fully secularized concept, with no predetermined notion of the common good. A just society is one guided by a social contract that seeks to balance a set of (competitive and, perhaps, incommensurable) individual rights, most notably the right to choose whatever one wants (negative liberty) so long as one’s choices do not hinder the choices of others, to be guaranteed a certain material standard of living, and to have a fair shot at competing for positions of power. This notion of justice differs from major antecedents of the Western tradition—such as the classic theories of Plato and

Aristotle—but it shares a common commitment to pursuing a society in which individuals receive their due. At the center of the social imaginary remains the same concept of justice: *suum cuique tribuere*.³⁵

Though I argue that Christian scripture conceives of justice in a fundamentally different way than this mainstream Western tradition, it is imperative to note that every major section of the biblical canon teaches that practicing justice is an essential aspect of what it means to live by faith in the God of Israel. Yahweh chose Abraham so “that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice” (Gen. 18:19). The Law of Moses is given to instruct Israel in the same ways of God: “Justice, and only justice, you shall follow, that you may live and inherit the land that the Lord your God is giving you” (Deut. 16:20). The books of Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles have at their heart the search for a righteous king, filled with the Spirit and wisdom of God, who will reign over God’s people with justice (1 Sam. 2:1-10; 2 Sam. 8:15; 1 Kings 3:28; 1 Chr.18:14; 2 Chr. 9:8). The Psalms are saturated with praise for the God who “has established his throne for justice” (Ps. 9:6) and with blessings upon those “who observe justice, who do righteousness at all times” (Ps. 106:3). The wisdom literature of the Old Testament gives “instruction in wise dealing, in righteousness, justice, and equity” (Proverbs 1:3), and Micah speaks in harmony with all the prophets of Israel when he famously says: “[The Lord] has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Mic. 6:8). Justice is a central

³⁵ For a concise and helpful summary of Rawls argument as well as some of the major criticisms that have been advanced against it, see Karen Lebacqz, *Six Theories of Justice*, 33-50.

theme running throughout the diverse literature of the Old Testament, and this theme is carried into the New Testament as well.

The Gospels declare that Jesus is the Messiah foretold by Israel's prophets, who has come "to bring justice to victory" (Matt. 12:20). Jesus himself refers to "justice and mercy and faithfulness" as "the weightier matters of the Law" (Matt. 23:23) and rebukes the Pharisees because they "neglect justice and the love of God" (Lk. 11:42). To learn what Jesus means by justice requires careful attention to his whole teaching ministry, with its emphasis on radical generosity, truthfulness, peacemaking, forgiveness, and care for the poor, ethnic outsiders, prisoners, and the sick. The substance of this teaching is embedded in the narratives of Acts (see especially 2:42-47 and 4:32-37) and continually reemphasized in the New Testament's epistles (see Rom. 12:9-18; 15:26; 2 Cor. 8:1-15; Gal. 2:10; 3:27-29; Col.3:11-15; 1 Tim. 6:17-19; Js. 1:27; 2:1-13; 1 Pet. 3:1-12; 1 Jn. 3:16-18). The Revelation of John, with which Christian scripture concludes, points forward to the triumph of Christ over evil and the establishment of universal justice and peace through the consummation of God's kingdom in the new heavens and earth. In short, the theme of justice is woven throughout the whole Bible, and there can be no robust conception of Christian discipleship without it.

However, it must not be assumed that justice in the Bible is equivalent to justice in the Western philosophical tradition. There are major differences between the two. One way to begin considering these differences is to note two new paradigms for thinking about justice that emerged from Christian theological reflections in the late twentieth century and have already come to exert significant influence in secular and

interfaith thought. The first of these is the paradigm of “restorative justice,” which has its origins in the creative work of North American Mennonites during the 1970s (Marshall, “Restorative,” 438). Christopher Marshall identifies four ways in which the restorative justice tradition differs from many conventional approaches to criminal justice. First, it seeks to bring victims and perpetrators of wrongdoing together for a dialogical process of confrontation and truth-telling, out of which proposals about how best to remedy the situation may emerge. Second, it upholds a definite set of values, including accountability, respect, truthfulness, humility, collaboration, and mutual care. Third, it emphasizes the rights and needs of victims rather than the punishment of offenders. Fourth, it conceptualizes crimes as hurts done towards people rather than the violation of a state’s laws, and its primary goals are healing wounds and restoring relationships rather than doling out punishments required by the law (Marshall, “Restorative,” 439). Though this restorative justice paradigm emerged from reflections on scripture within particular Christian communities, it has come to exert significant influence in many secular settings. Notably, it now provides the basis for the juvenile justice system of New Zealand, and it was the cornerstone for the monumental work of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (Marshall, “Restorative,” 438). As Marshall rightly observes, the entities that have sought to put this paradigm into practice have always emphasized redressing the wounds of victims and renewing wellbeing in the community as a whole (“Restorative” 439). For this tradition, justice focuses less on balancing individual rights and more on pursuing a particular vision of communal flourishing that is directly connected to the biblical concept of *shalom*.

What the restorative justice paradigm represents in the realm of criminal justice is mirrored in the arena of international conflicts by the movement known as “just peacemaking,” which emerged from the theological reflection of several Christian churches and denominations in the late twentieth century. Between 1980 and 1986, four Christian bodies in the United States—the Presbyterian Church (USA), the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, the United Methodist Council of Bishops, and the United Church of Christ—all independently published official documents outlining what would become the distinctive emphases of this approach. The movement quickly spread to Christian bodies in other nations and has since been officially endorsed by major interfaith groups, including a coalition of thirty Muslim, Jewish, and Christian scholars associated with the United States Institute of Peace (Stassen, “Just Peacemaking,” 442-443). The animating conviction of the just peacemaking paradigm is that traditional proponents of both just war theory and pacifism in the Christian tradition have focused energy almost exclusively on the question of when (if ever) war may be morally acceptable, and they have neglected the urgent and proactive work of identifying and encouraging those practices that promote peace at the local, national, and international levels.³⁶ In short, the energy that is directed toward thinking about “just war” needs to be re-channeled into thinking about “just peace.” Thus, the movement’s manifesto—*Just Peacemaking: The New Paradigm for the Ethics of Peace*

³⁶ On the just war tradition, Michael Walzer’s *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations*, remains an important modern text, though David D. Corey and J. Daryl Charles’ *The Just War Tradition: An Introduction* provides a much more nuanced and variegated account of the tradition’s historical development. The most prominent Christian pacifists in America for the last half century have been John Howard Yoder and Yoder’s student Stanley Hauerwas. Yoder’s books *The Politics of Jesus* and *The War of the Lamb: The Ethics of Nonviolence and Peacemaking* are touchstones. Hauerwas’ prodigious output makes it difficult to recommend a single text, but the essays in *War and the American Difference: Theological Reflections on Violence and National Identity* provide an excellent place to start. *The Hauerwas Reader* is also an invaluable resource.

and War—brings together an interdenominational coalition of Christian scholars from the just war and pacifist traditions to give their unanimous affirmation of ten proactive processes, organized under three categories. The practices are as follows:

Peacemaking Initiatives

1. Support nonviolent direct action.
2. Take independent initiatives to reduce threat.
3. Use cooperative conflict resolution.
4. Acknowledge responsibility for conflict and injustice; seek repentance and forgiveness.

Justice

5. Advance democracy, human rights, and religious liberty.
6. Foster just and sustainable economic development.

Love and Community

7. Work with emerging cooperative forces in the international system.
8. Strengthen the United Nations and international efforts for cooperation and human rights.
9. Reduce offensive weapons and weapons trade.
10. Encourage grassroots peacemaking groups and voluntary associations.

I am deeply sympathetic with many of the practices advocated in this just peacemaking manifesto, but at present I would simply observe that this movement—like the restorative justice movement—associates the work of justice directly with the pursuit of *shalom* at the communal, national, and international levels. It is also worth noting that both of these traditions began with theological reflection on scripture within Christian

communities that were responding to the particular circumstances of their contexts, and both movements have come to exert significant influence outside of the Christian community in a very short period of time.

These two theologically-rooted paradigms for thinking about justice depart from the mainstream model of justice in Western philosophical thought in subtle but important ways. The dominant idea within the restorative justice and just peacemaking traditions is not “allocating to each his own” but pursuing reconciled communities of peace. Consequently, these traditions place less emphasis upon calculating degrees of merit or adjudicating the proper use of violent state power to respond to various evils, and more emphasis upon imagining and enacting constructive efforts to promote the common good. This is not to say, however, that these traditions set aside all concepts of merit and dessert in favor of a consequentialist or utilitarian concern for how to achieve some desired end. Nor do these traditions exclude the use of coercive power for the sake of securing justice. Rather, such matters are relegated to an important, secondary status in which they guide and limit the sorts of actions that should be taken to rectify social evils in the name of justice. The top priority, however, is given to the pursuit of human flourishing at communal, national, and international levels. I argue below that this re-ordering of emphases is deeply resonant with the teachings of Christian scripture. In order to prepare the way for my discussion of biblical justice, however, I turn first to consider some of the most important criticisms of justice among modern theologians and secular thinkers.

Despite the centrality of justice in classic moral philosophy and in the Christian tradition, many modern and postmodern thinkers have questioned the legitimacy and

desirability of the concept. It is worth taking time to briefly consider two prominent attacks on justice from Christian theologians as well as an array of related criticisms from secular thinkers. Though I am committed to upholding an emphasis on justice as an essential cornerstone of Christian theology and discipleship, there is real merit to many of the concerns articulated by Christian and secular critics of the concept. Taking such criticisms seriously is a way of avoiding the all-too-frequent tendency to hastily slap the word “justice” on one’s own social or political agenda and then feel reassured that one has claimed the moral high ground. In fact, many inadequate conceptions of justice have provided the ideological rationalization for inflicting great evils throughout history, not least in the modern era. In order to work against this tendency, I attempt in this chapter to give a fair hearing to the most penetrating critiques of justice en route to developing an account of the concept that is less vulnerable to being hijacked for nefarious ends.

3.3. Christian Critics of Justice

Among Christian thinkers, the most common argument against emphasizing justice is that Jesus supplanted it with the higher virtue of love as the cornerstone of social ethics. It is easy to see why Christians might say such a thing. First of all, Jesus famously overturned a certain understanding of retributive justice rooted in prominent interpretations of the Mosaic Law when he command his disciples to love even those by whom they have been wronged. This importance aspect of Jesus’ teaching is especially emphasized in the Sermon on the Mount:

You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the

right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you. You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. (Matt. 5:38-45)

According to the logic of the ancient *lex taliones*—“An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth”—which Jesus quotes from Exodus 21:23-25, it would seem that the thing to do with a person who slaps one on the cheek is to respond with a proportionate punishment for the wrong done. Likewise, the logic of proportionate retributive justice would seem to demand that those who wrongly persecute the innocent should be held accountable and punished accordingly. But Jesus surprisingly calls his disciples not to “resist the one who is evil” but rather to love their enemies so that they will be true children of God, who is kind to the “evil” and the “unjust.”

The ethical impulses contained in this text are deeply connected to the core themes of Jesus’ teaching, which require an alternative understanding of justice. Over-against the self-righteousness that sees God’s salvation as the vindication of elite religious insiders—those who are “righteous” and “good”—and the defeat of their enemies, Jesus continually teaches that even the “righteous” are sinners in need of God’s grace, and that the grace which God shows his people should be extended to their enemies (Matt. 16:12-15; 18:21-35; Mk. 2:17; Lk. 18:19; Jn. 8:7). The classical understanding of justice as “allocating to each his own”—good for the good and bad for the bad—proves to be a less-than-salutary starting point for human social life once one takes seriously the statement of Jesus that “no one is good except God alone” (Lk. 18:19). In its Pauline register, this same point is made in the following terms: “None is

righteous. No, not one. . . . All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:10, 23). According to both Jesus and Paul, the solution to this problem is God’s love for the undeserving and God’s offer of forgiveness to sinners who repent. Significantly, these concepts of love and forgiveness are both predicated upon giving benefits that are undeserved and withholding punishments that are well-deserved, which means that justice—in its classical Western definition—has been reconfigured.

For these reasons, some theologians—and many popular preachers—have spoken of God’s salvation in Christ as the victory of love over justice. Indeed, scripture says quite plainly that “mercy triumphs over judgment” (James 2:13), and it is intuitive for most Westerners to associate mercy with love and judgment with justice. For example, Anders Nygren, in his monumental work *Eros and Agape*, argues that Christianity puts to death all forms of religion and ethics that are based on justice. Central to his argument is the claim that divine love, *agape*, is spontaneous, unmotivated by the merits of its object, unconditional, and creative, whereas justice is motivated and conditional. In Nygren’s exposition, God does not love any human on the basis of that human’s merits, and divine love is not contingent upon the worthiness of the beloved object. Rather, God loves persons who do not deserve this love, and the love that God freely bestows has the creative power to renew and transform those whom God loves. This is the creative aspect: *agape* finds unworthy objects and makes them worthy. This conception of divine love is deeply rooted in the vision of Martin Luther, who in the final thesis of his Heidelberg disputation asserts: “The love of God does not find, but creates, that which is pleasing to it” (28). Moreover, these claims of Nygren and Luther are both based on the New Testament, which declares on one hand that

God's love is revealed in Christ's self-giving sacrifice for the redemption of underserving sinners (Rom. 5:8), and, on the other hand, that this unmerited love has the effect of recreating those who trust in Christ (Eph. 2:10; 2 Cor. 5:17) so that they come to embody the same love by which they have been remade (1 Jn. 4:7-21).

It is easy to see why Nygren would conclude that this notion of love is directly contradictory with the logic of justice, which—in the Western philosophical tradition—is concerned primarily with treating people according to what they deserve. To reiterate, Nygren's insists that divine love, which is the model for all Christian ethics, is not motivated by any merit in the beloved object. And since those “who have freely received God's love are called to pass it on freely to their fellow-men” (91), Nygren concludes: “‘Motivated’ justice must give way to ‘unmotivated’ love” (88). He is not arguing that, in certain circumstance, love must become the guiding principle of action rather than justice. On the contrary, Nygren's contention is that justice is no longer a relevant principle at all for the Christian. “Where spontaneous love and generosity are found,” he writes, “the order of justice is obsolete and invalidated” (90). In what follows, I argue that Nygren's conclusion here is incorrect. According to Christian scripture, it is too simplistic to say that justice and love are mutually exclusive. However, Nygren helpfully focuses attention on a deep rift between common understandings of Christian love and common philosophical conceptions of justice. His argument thus forces Christians—for whom love is undeniably the chief virtue—to think carefully and critically about the role that justice plays in their understanding of faithful discipleship. I argue that—contrary to the dominant Western tradition—grace, mercy, generosity, and forgiveness are all aspects of biblical justice.

A second important criticism of the idea that justice should play a guiding roll in Christian social ethics comes from Stanley Hauerwas. In a chapter of *After Christendom?* provocatively titled “The Politics of Justice: Why Justice is a Bad Idea for Christians,” Hauerwas argues that, for the contemporary church, the language of justice—like that of freedom—is fraught with so much post-Enlightenment conceptual baggage that articulating an authentically Christian account of justice is nigh impossible. He contends, moreover, that when Christians unintentionally bring the presuppositions of secular liberalism into their political discourse about justice, they end up reinforcing the ideological pillars that justify the modern nation state’s claims to power. The chapter has provoked a considerable amount of critical ire—not least from the incisive pen of Nicholas Wolterstorff—which should not be surprising since Hauerwas’ stated goal is to challenge the basic ethical orientation that he sees as dominant among contemporary Christians.³⁷ However, it is my view that his critique is much needed, and—though I end up disagreeing with him in important ways—the church needs to heed his warning about the danger of smuggling into our understandings of biblical language a whole host of extra-biblical and counter-productive ideas that are built into almost all contemporary Western discourse about social justice.

At the core of Hauerwas’ argument is his claim that contemporary Western notions of justice are concerned most fundamentally with guarding the primacy of individual rights and freedoms. He argues that the Rawlsian twin emphasis on individual negative liberty and social equality may be mutually exclusive: “If you want to create a social order where everyone is provided with as much liberty as is

³⁷ Wolterstorff responds to Hauerwas in *Justice: Rights and Wrongs*, 76-78.

compatible with liberty for all, it is very unlikely you will be able at the same time to sustain egalitarian social policies” (47). The problem here for Hauerwas is that one cannot assume that powerful and privileged individuals who believe their most fundamental right is the unhindered ability to choose—negative liberty—will always or even frequently makes choices to use their power and privilege in a way that promotes social egalitarianism. In fact, he worries that dominant notions of justice often serve as an ideological prop to justify the privilege of the privileged. He expresses particular concern about wealthy American Christians who often talk about justice in terms of giving generously to benefit the poor:

One of the things that bothers me about such discourse is the designation ‘us,’ meaning Christians, and ‘them,’ meaning the poor. Such language inherently presupposes that Christians have no convictions that might . . . make them poor. As a result we privilege our place as rich Christians who can justify our being rich because we are concerned about justice” (46-47)

For many American Christians who enjoy disproportionate wealth, I would agree with Hauerwas that the idea of using this wealth for the benefit of the poor in the name of justice conveniently obscures the fact that the New Testament should cause us to examine whether the lifestyle upon which our riches depend is consonant with our vocation to follow Jesus. One could add that the wealth of the wealthy has often been obtained at the expense of exploited laborers whose position in the existing economic order makes talk of social and economic equality sound like a bad joke. When one considers that a very high percentage of the poor—both in the U.S. and across the

globe—are, in fact, Christians, the irony of calling the gifts of the wealthy to their exploited spiritual family “justice” become even more apparent.³⁸

Moreover, Hauerwas correctly notes that a basic presupposition of much modern discourse about justice is that “we all have rights” (46), and “doing justice” is often reduced to demanding that nation states deliver our rights to us. Thus, “standing up for my rights” is frequently honored especially in the United States as a kind of moral heroism. However, this way of viewing justice makes it something on the basis of which we make demands upon the state rather than something that makes demands upon each of us. In addition, the idea that doing justice involves “demanding our rights” from the state provides a subtle justification of the hegemonic order of military and economic power that enables states to give their citizens what they demand. A concept of justice that reduces Christian ethics to sharing some of our wealth with the disadvantaged while demanding that powerful states give us the benefits we have learned to demand falls far short of scripture’s radical call to discipleship.

Hauerwas argues convincingly that the faulty view of justice at the heart of this anemic vision of Christian ethics is built upon the basic error of imagining that some abstract, trans-cultural notion of justice is accessible to objective human reason.

Drawing heavily on the work of Alisdair MacIntyre, Hauerwas writes: “the problem is that we have been taught by the Enlightenment to believe that in fact there is a concept of ‘justice qua justice’ that corresponds to a concept of ‘rationality qua rationality’ which blinds us to the tradition-dependent character of any account of justice” (49).

Since humans are finite creatures who are always thinking from a particular cultural and

³⁸ For scathing exploration of such themes, see Ron Sider’s *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger: Moving from Affluence to Generosity* and David Bentley Hart’s “Christ’s Rabble: The First Christians Were Not Like Us.”

historical standpoint, any human theory of justice will inevitably emerge from an intellectual tradition comprised of contingent cultural values and presuppositions.³⁹ If theological emphases upon the limits of creaturely knowledge and philosophical reflections on the sociology of knowledge have left anyone unconvinced about the validity of this point, the undeniable fact that many mutually exclusive claims are made in the name of justice every day should make even the most confident rationalist aware of the epistemological complexities of this situation. I would add that the error of believing one's tradition-dependent theory of justice is universally accessible to objective reason has serious consequences. First, it tends to hinder one's capacity to take seriously competing visions that might expose and correct the faulty presuppositions of one's own view. Second, it almost inevitably leads to the misguided conviction that one's culturally contingent vision of *the* just social order must be upheld as the norm to which all societies must conform. Third, there are serious dangers when Western Christians quote scriptures about justice and then unknowingly pack the word full of meaning that is derived from the values and presuppositions built into any of the competing ideologies of the post-Christian West. This error ends up giving religious sanction to a status quo that normalizes the militaristic hegemony of modern nation states, the extravagant wealth of many Western Christians, and the idolatrous exaltation of the individual's right to choose above all other social goods.

³⁹ The stream of Christian thought most likely to deny this claim is that of "natural law." I share with natural law theorists the conviction that all creation is intrinsically ordered towards transcendental good, but I would add that according to scripture creation itself has been "subjected to futility" (Rom. 8:20) as a result of human evil. Moreover, the book of Ecclesiastes is rather emphatic about the point that reasoned reflection on the world as it is does not produce any clear or coherent vision of natural justice (on which, more below). Further, the natural law tradition is itself a tradition, dependent upon a certain Christian understanding of creation, and the tenets of natural law are no longer intelligible once this particular Christian framework has been removed. David Bentley Hart argues cogently along these lines in a series of essays: "Is, Ought, and Nature's Laws," "Nature Love's to Hide," and "Purpose and Function."

Hauerwas is far from alone in advancing such productive criticisms. Many theologians have noted the problem with importing into biblical texts about justice an array of Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment ideas that are foreign to the scriptural context. The usual danger of anachronistic interpretation is exacerbated here by the fact that discourse about justice is so easily appropriated to serve any number of political interests. Perhaps most notably, John Milbank has argued vigorously in a host of texts since his landmark work *Theology and Social Theory* that a great deal of contemporary theological discourse has wrongly imported secular liberalism's emphasis upon individual rights, negative liberty, and the social contract. According to Milbank, these emphases of liberalism undergird the dominant ideologies of both the Right and Left. In "How Liberalism is Undoing Itself," which is co-authored with Adrian Pabst, Milbank puts this point concisely:

[The] left has advanced a social-cultural liberalism that promotes individual rights and equality of opportunity for self-expression, while the right has advocated an economic-political liberalism that champions the free market liberated from the constricting shackles of the bureaucratic state. We have a "liberal right" celebrating economic and political negative liberty, and a "liberal left" celebrating cultural and sexual negative liberty.

Milbank and Pabst contrast these conceptions of "negative liberty"—the right to choose—with "positive liberty," which refers to a classical and Christian way of thinking about freedom primarily as a thing's flourishing according to its kind. Whereas the former signifies the unhindered expression of arbitrary will, the latter indicates ontological self-realization. As Milbank and Pabst rightly argue, this emphasis upon negative liberty is directly related to the tendency of liberal societies to rule "questions of truth or goodness out of the court of public discussion, because liberals claim that in diverse societies with rival values the pursuit of such and similar shared ends is

necessarily intolerant and oppressive.” But this very act of excluding any discourse of the common good in favor of individual negative liberty and the social contract ends up serving “the interests of the administrative state and the unfettered market.” Thus, Milbank argues that liberalisms of the Right and Left have colluded to bring about “an unprecedented centrality of power and concentration of wealth,”—a new oligarchy— which “combines impersonal technocracy with a manipulative populism, while holding in contempt the genuine priorities of most people.” This analysis deserves serious consideration, and if—as Hauerwas argues—much contemporary theological talk about justice ends up reproducing the same ideological commonplaces that undergird the “new oligarchy” of which Milbank and Pabst speak, then there are good reasons to be critical of such talk.

While I grant the basic validity of these criticisms, I argue that giving up talk about justice altogether is simply not a valid option for Christians. The scriptures repeatedly and emphatically place justice at the center of the life of faith and faithfulness. Rather than throwing out the concept, what is needed is a more careful analysis of its tradition-specific meaning within the biblical canon as well as creative reflection on what it means to embody the distinctive biblical vision of justice in a contemporary context. Before turning to these constructive projects, however, I first consider an array of influential criticism of justice coming from secular thinkers, especially Nietzsche, Marx, and their heirs.

3.4. Secular Critics of Justice

In *On The Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche argues that “justice” is a term used to describe the social order established and enforced by the powerful. It is a thin veneer of moral rhetoric hiding the mechanisms of force. He writes: “Justice at the earliest stage of its development is the good will which prevails among those of roughly equal power to come to terms with one another, to ‘come to an understanding’ once more through a settlement—and to *force* those who are less powerful to agree to a settlement among themselves” (52). According to this view, the language of justice is a normalizing or naturalizing tactic, an appeal to trans-historical moral principles in order to justify the historically constituted relations of power that we call “law and order.”

Nietzsche develops this train of thought by challenging the argument of German philosopher Eugen Dühring that the concept of justice emerges historically as an expression of *ressentiment*, the experience of anger and frustration towards those whom one believes to have caused one’s difficulties. According to Dühring’s view, it is the less-powerful—those who have suffered at the hands of others—who begin using the language of justice as a way to demand that wrongs be righted. Thus, “justice” is the cry of those whom we might call oppressed, disinherited, or marginalized; it is their demand for restitution or revenge. To this Nietzsche responds: “Wherever justice is practiced, wherever justice is upheld, one sees a stronger power seek means to put an end to the senseless raging of *ressentiment* among weaker powers subordinate to it (whether groups or individuals)” (56). This is to say, the actions that “justice” justifies are those by which the powerful silence the cries of the weak. Nietzsche names many mechanisms of force by which this is accomplished, but he claims that

the most decisive action which the highest power takes and implements against the predominance of reactive and retroactive feelings—and this is the action it always undertakes, as soon as it is somehow strong enough to do so—is the establishment of the law, the imperious explanation of what in its eyes passes as permitted, as right, and what as forbidden, as wrong. (56)

According to Nietzsche, law is a historically constituted mechanism of power which establishes the norms of a social order as a compromise among the powerful, which is then imposed upon the weak, and which claims for itself justice, thus investing its arbitrary and contingent norms with the moral force of “right” and “wrong.”

Several decades before Nietzsche wrote *On the Genealogy of Morals*, distinct but related lines of argument about the moral rhetoric of justice had already been developed by Marx and Engels. In *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*, they decry the exploitation of individuals by individuals and of nations by nations, but this denunciation of exploitation is not in the name of justice. On the contrary, justice for Marx and Engels is an idea dependent upon pre-communist economic formations in the history of class struggle. In their view, all such concepts are the mere ideational superstructure of an economic base, and the ideas inevitably give way as new organizations of society emerge. They write: “What more does the history of ideas prove, than that intellectual production changes its character in proportion as material production is changed? The ruling ideas of each age have ever been the ideas of its ruling class” (25). To this claim they imagine their bourgeois critics objecting that, though religious, moral, philosophical, and juridical ideas have changed throughout history, religion, moral philosophy, and the law have persisted through every age. These imagined interlocutors further argue that such constants of human society are undergirded by certain “eternal truths”—including the concepts of freedom and justice—which have been “common to all states of society,” and that communism errs

by abolishing all eternal truths instead of reconstituting them for a new age (26). But Marx and Engels reply that certain ideas have been common to the social consciousness of all past ages precisely because they have all been founded upon some exploitation of one part of society by another. Because communism is the radical and historically unique break with all forms of exploitation, Marx and Engels argue that it will also be the most radical break with all traditional ideas. Instead of defending themselves against the charge that “Communism abolishes eternal truths, it abolishes all religion, and all morality,” (26) they simply claim that this abolition is both necessary and inevitable.

There is, within the Marxist tradition, considerable disagreement about the relationship between Marxism and the concept of justice. Norman Geras notes that, before the 1970s, an unresolved tension persisted in which Marxists thinkers sometimes disavowed any reliance upon the concept of justice and other times argued from justice (perhaps unreflectively) for the superiority of communism (275). However, the increased interest among Western philosophers in the concept of distributive justice, beginning in the 1970s, brought this tension to the fore, inspiring a host of arguments among Marxist theorists either that Marxists must repudiate the concept of justice or that Marx argued precisely that capitalism is unjust (276-277). Personally, I find reasonable the view advanced by Geras that it is impossible to reconcile neatly all of Marx’s ideas about this concept. On one hand, Marx generally associates justice with the coercive power of the juridical systems of states, which are a product of class struggle that would be abolished in a classless society. On the other hand, Marx’s replacement of the dictum “to each according to their work” with the dictum “to each according to their need” is, in fact, an argument for one form of distributive justice over

another. Geras' attempt to harmonize these disparate strands of thought is as follows: "Inasmuch as [Marx] did clearly regard the most general distribution of benefits and burdens under capitalism as, by some historically transcendent standards, morally objectionable, we must conclude that Marx thought capitalism unjust on a broader conception of justice than the one he himself professed" (277). In my view, it is highly questionable whether Marx would have accepted this description of his view, with its appeal to "historically transcendent standards" or morality. Nonetheless, Geras' effort towards conceptual reconstruction explains why many contemporary Marxists do in fact employ the concept of justice, while also demonstrating why other thinkers of the secular Left might understand Marx as an anti-justice thinker akin to Nietzsche.

Despite important differences between the Nietzschean and Marxian approaches to thinking about the concept of justice, the texts I have briefly considered share some important common ground. They both treat justice as a historical construction rather than a culturally-independent "eternal ideal," and they likewise agree that this construction has generally worked to establish the power of the powerful rather than to challenge various forms of exploitation and oppression. In this regard, certain sympathies with these older secular critiques are apparent in the more recent Christian argument of Hauerwas. As I have shown above, Hauerwas rejects the idea that there is any "tradition-independent" ideal of justice accessible to objective, culture-free human reason, and he argues that secular liberal notions of justice (which predominate in the contemporary West) serve to justify the extravagant wealth of many Western Christians as well as the unchecked military, economic, and political power of nation states. I agree with these two basic points. Justice is always defined according to some culturally

contingent system of thought and life; moreover, justice is quite frequently defined in a way that (wittingly or unwittingly) props up the existing power structure of the cultures from which such definitions emerge. I would add, however, that serious reflection on Christian scripture reveals a tradition of thinking about justice that radically subverts all oppressive power structures while calling every individual and all communities to pursue the peace of God in which creation in all of its rich diversity—including the diversity of human cultural forms—can flourish. However, before developing this biblical argument, it is worth pausing to note some of the ways in which the Nietzschean and Marxian traditions of thought continue to animate contemporary secular cultural theory.

One touchstone for the continued critical stance towards justice among cultural theorists of the secular Left is the work of Michel Foucault—the most influential continental philosopher of the late twentieth century—whose figure still looms large among cultural theorists of the early twenty-first century. Foucault’s writings on the history of juridical theory and practice are numerous and varied, but his early thoughts on the concept of justice underlying the history of Western law are expressed lucidly in his famous debate with Noam Chomsky. In the course of debate, Chomsky argues that one should not automatically grant that laws issued by state powers are “legal,” because legality must be rooted most basically in a concept of justice that is independent of state power (46). Foucault immediately starts questioning this assertion and suggesting that civil disobedience should not be justified in terms of “justice or a superior form of legality,” but rather “by the necessity of class struggle, which is at the present time essential for the proletariat in their struggle against the ruling class” (47). After

Chomsky's initial response, Foucault presses the point again by asking whether Chomsky commits an act of civil disobedience "by virtue of an ideal justice, or because the class struggle makes it useful and necessary?" (48). The Marxian overtones of Foucault's question here are readily apparent. Rather than appealing to justice as an immutable, eternal ideal, he suggests that political action requires no other basis than the present needs of the working classes in their struggle against exploitation. This exchange prompts an extended debate about Chomsky and Foucault's interlocking concepts of justice, legality, power, and class struggle, which brings to the surface the deep tensions between these two thinkers on the question of "human nature," in which Chomsky believes and Foucault does not.

In the course of these arguments, Foucault adds to his Marxian terminology an explicit identification with Nietzsche. Towards the end of the exchange, for example, Foucault says:

I will be a little bit Nietzschean about this; . . . it seems to me that the idea of justice in itself is an idea which in effect has been invented and put to work in different types of societies as an instrument of a certain political and economic power or as a weapon against that power. But it seems to me that, in any case the notion of justice itself functions within a society of classes as a claim made by the oppressed and as a justification for it And in a classless society, I am not sure that we would still use this notion of justice. (55)

Here Foucault displays greater subtlety than the statements of Marx and Nietzsche cited above when he acknowledges the obvious fact that discourse about justice has been wielded against dominant regimes of power as well as in their favor. Nonetheless, he maintains that the concept itself emerges from struggles of power, that it is inextricably dependent upon the material situation of class difference, that it would cease to exist in a classless society, and that power itself—rather than justice—is really what is at stake in all political struggle. This final point is made more clearly in an earlier statement,

when Foucault asserts that the proletariat fight not for justice, but for the purpose of taking power (51). As he memorably puts it: “One makes war to win, not because it is just” (51). In context, it is implicit in Foucault’s statement that all political struggle is a kind of war, and his statement that such war is fought for victory rather than justice is not meant as a disillusioned lamentation on a regrettable state of affairs. It is clear that Foucault approves of the struggles of the proletariat and that he likewise approves of engaging in such struggles for their own sake. Power is wielded for the purpose of acquiring more power, and it needs no further justification.

With this idea Chomsky sharply disagrees. He rejects all forms of class warfare that could result in a “terrorist police state, in which freedom and dignity and decent human relations would be destroyed” (52). Though he rejects most theories of violent revolution, Chomsky also acknowledges that a conscientious Leninist would justify any transitional “period of violent dictatorship” in the name of putting an end to class oppression—an end he affirms as well worth achieving—and that claiming to end oppression is necessarily (even if implicitly) claiming to establish a greater justice (52). Though he freely admits the dangers of believing that one has imagined a perfect justice or a perfect society, Chomsky upholds the necessity of estimating “relative justices” (53) and asserts that any violence exercised without some grounding in the goal of “a more just result” is “totally immoral” (53). Thus he admonishes those who struggle merely for the “ends of putting some other group into power” without setting forth any argument that their cause serves “the ends of justice” to extract themselves from the struggle (56).

For Chomsky, the notion of justice and the possibility of estimating relative justices are rooted in a scientifically discernable human nature that lies beneath and produces culture, a nature that consists of a “need for creative work, for creative inquiry, for free creation without the arbitrary limiting effect of coercive institutions” (37). A just and decent society “should maximize the possibilities for this fundamental human characteristic to be realized” (37). He thus advocates for societies characterized by “decentralized power and free association,” in which “fundamental human emotions” such as “sympathy and the search for justice” may arise (63). Many Christian theologians (such as myself) would be pleased with such talk about creativity and a capacity for empathy as inherent in the *imago Dei*, but they might also be skeptical (as I am) about the ideas that such qualities are scientifically discernable, that justice can be reduced to the social facilitation of individual freedom, and that a society based on free association will allow the fundamental emotion of sympathy to rise above the human capacity for evil.

Foucault shares all of my skepticism, but without the sympathetic appreciation for some of Chomsky’s statements about justice and human nature. To Chomsky’s claims about human nature, Foucault responds with a historicist, anti-essentialist argument typical of those thinkers who have been labeled poststructuralist. He contends that all Chomsky’s “notions of human nature, of justice, of the realization of the essence of human beings, are all notions and concepts which have been formed within our civilization, within our type of knowledge and our form of philosophy, and that as a result form part of our class system” (57). For Foucault, this is not simply a matter of acknowledging the historical and cultural contingency of all human intellectual

formulations, a point with which many theologians would concur. Rather, the political import of his argument is that the concept of justice is contingent upon the historical phenomenon of class difference, and thus it should be rejected. He continues: “one can’t, however regrettable it may be, put forward these notions”—the notions of human nature, of justice, and of the realization of a human essence—“to describe or justify a fight which should—and shall in principle—overthrow the very fundamentals of our society” (57). Here it appears that Foucault’s early thought runs along similar lines to Fanon’s infamous argument that the destruction of one’s current enemy is the only justification for political action. Foucault seems to advocate pursuing power for power’s sake, waging war to win, without any claim that the future society for which one fights is more just, or more conducive to the flourishing of human nature, than the present society. And, like Fanon, Foucault is not averse to the use of violence in achieving political ends for which he explicitly denies any moral justification. As he puts it: “When the proletariat takes power, it may be quite possible that the proletariat will exert towards the classes over which it has just triumphed, a violent, dictatorial, and even bloody power. I can’t see what objection one could make to this” (52). Of course, since Foucault has already jettisoned all language about justice, it is difficult to imagine anyone making moral objections to anything from his perspective. But the point is clear: The struggle for power is sufficient reason for the use of violence. Politics is a matter of identifying and defeating enemies, by whatever means necessary.

I share Chomsky’s distaste for this explicitly amoral justification of violence, but I also share Foucault’s incredulity towards Chomsky’s theory of justice. I am unconvinced by Chomsky’s claims to deduce from linguistic science (in the form of his

generative theory of grammar) an essential human nature from which objective reason may extrapolate the sort of society in which such natures can be realized. Moreover, the vision of society thus extrapolated on Chomsky's terms seems to exalt the negative liberty of individuals as its highest social good, and the criticisms of Milbank and Hauerwas discussed above thus apply to his account of justice. These difficulties serve to highlight the broader challenges associated with thinking about justice. Throughout the Western philosophical tradition, mainstream thinkers have continually sought to discern a universal ideal of justice that can then be applied to all situations, but such theorization always emerges from within a particular cultural situation. No matter how persistently finite human subjects may imagine that they can think from some sort of transcultural perch upon which they avoid value presuppositions, such a state of affairs can never be. Chomsky may think that he speaks with scientific objectivity, but the members of many non-Western cultures, for example, might be surprised that he begins with the phenomenon of language—an inherently social phenomenon that is always already rooted in a dynamic cultural tradition—and deduces that human flourishing consists of the uninhibited free expression of individuals. Alternative visions of human flourishing—beginning with common social goods rather than personal liberties, for example—are imaginable. But Chomsky's scientifically deduced theory of human nature and the just society turns out to look like a particular form of the political liberalism that predominates in his cultural setting.

A similar point can be made about the theories of John Rawls. As noted above, Rawls famously takes as his starting point that philosophers of justice must imagine themselves in the “original position,” an imaginary state in which they are hidden

behind a “veil of ignorance” about their personal histories or their roles in society, yet possessing basic knowledge of human psychology, economics, social science, and the natural sciences. From this imagined position, thinkers are supposed to be able to impartially discern the form of social organization in which ideal distributive justice is realized. The original position is, most basically, a way of saying that utopian dreamers should try to be objective and impartial. However, this idea has multiple problems. First, it is highly doubtful that there is such a thing as basic knowledge of psychology, social science, or economics that is not already laced with cultural values and presuppositions. Moreover, many philosophers have pointed out that the theory of justice Rawls develops after assuming his “original position” is, among other things, the expression of a particular psychological disposition—risk aversion—which other individuals do not share. It is, at any rate, demonstrable that philosophers of different temperament, who have placed themselves behind Rawls’ veil of ignorance, have dreamt up very different versions of utopia. Even more important is the unsurprising fact that Rawls’ purportedly objective conception of justice ends up taking as its first principle the basic cultural value of the society and class in which he lives: that “each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive basic liberty compatible with a similar liberty for others” (60). Rawls, an educated member of a culture in which political liberalism (of the Right and the Left) is the air we all breathe, imagines himself to be inhabiting an extra-cultural position, from which he impartially argues that political liberalism is what anyone in such a position would want. But it is not difficult to imagine some starving laborers from the developing world who—when asked to assume the original position—would state as their first principle of the just society that

all humans would eat the bread produced by their toil. Even in the “original position” Rawls remains a bourgeois liberal. In fact, I am sympathetic with many of Rawls proposals for thinking about distributive justice—as I am with some of Chomsky’s ideas about human flourishing—but they both present themselves as objective defenders of an abstract justice that has been discerned through the use of tradition-independent, value-free reason, and they both end up reproducing the basic convictions of the culture in which they dwell. This stretches my capacity for credulity beyond its limits.

However, all this is not to say that I think we should join the early Foucault by affirming the Nietzschean impulse (shared by some Marxists) to toss out the very idea of justice. It is worth noting that Marxism has in fact spawned a great many terrorist police states without taking human societies perceivably closer to the goal of abolishing class difference, and that Nietzsche’s *Genealogy of Morals* concludes by despising Christian compassion for the weak in a manner that many fascists have found congenial. Of course, Marx and Nietzsche would both likely have turned in distaste from much of what has been done in their names, and they might likewise have called many such deeds perversions of their respective visions. But they could not—at any rate—condemn the deeds of Stalin, Mao, or Hitler as *injustices*. To push the point further, such icons of the human capacity for self-destruction as these twentieth century ideologues cannot be accused of deviating from the principles that power is pursued for its own sake or that war is waged for the purpose of victory. I do not hold Marx and Nietzsche directly responsible for the atrocities committed in their names or by those whom they have influenced, any more than I hold Jesus of Nazareth responsible for the Crusades and the Inquisition. However, it would not be difficult to quote the words of

Jesus about justice, peace, and love as evidence that Christian atrocities were evil according to the terms of Christ; it might be more difficult to make a genuinely Marxian or Nietzschean argument that moral terminology such as evil and justice has any meaning in relation to the Holocaust or the Cultural Revolution. And this is my point: refusing to ground one's social vision in moral concepts like justice makes arguing that anyone *ought* to prefer this vision over another (say, a vision of violent racial nationalism) exceedingly difficult. Moreover, I think Chomsky is correct to point out that denouncing or resisting oppression and exploitation—as Marx, at any rate, very clearly does—is, in fact, an implicit claim to be advocating for a world characterized by greater justice. The Marxists—of whom there are many—who make this appeal to justice explicit are, in my view, taking the better and more coherent approach.

Those of us who self-consciously stand within a moral tradition that we could not have discovered by the use of trans-historical reason are free, not only to say that we find actions such as mass murder distasteful, but to condemn them as damnably evil. Thus, I am inclined to gratefully affirm the validity of Marx and Nietzsche's important point that theories of justice are always historically constituted and usually in such a way that protects the power of the powerful, but disinclined to accept their conclusion that this means justice—as an eternal principle—must be tossed out. After all, it is a basic Christian conviction that the eternal, ineffable God of justice has disclosed himself in and through the contingencies of history, which is the only place where finite creatures could have discovered him. It is only by attending to this particular history—the history of God's dealings with Israel and with Jesus Christ—that the church's

tradition has any access to a way of wisdom or justice that can challenge the oppressive powers of the present age. To this tradition I now turn.

3.5. Wisdom and Justice in Christian Scripture

While the concept of justice recurs frequently throughout the scripture, biblical justice needs to be carefully distinguished from the various theories of justice that predominate in the Western tradition. In fact, scripture indicates that the meaning of justice cannot be learned through abstract intellectual reflection alone. It is associated closely with wisdom, and—like all aspects of wisdom—must be learned through a process of thoughtful, creative, reverent living in faithful dependence upon God. Given this connection with wisdom, I begin my analysis of biblical justice here by turning to the Bible’s sapiential literature, starting with Proverbs—the oft-misunderstood and over-simplified heart of this literature—and then adding an analysis of Ecclesiastes. Both of these books include a reference to the Davidic dynasty in their opening verse: “The proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel” (Prov. 1:1) and “The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem” (Ecc. 1:1). Thus, the perspective of both books is shaped by an assumption of kingship as a stable political reality and by association with a Solomonic variation of the Davidic dynasty. This perspective differs substantially from the antagonism towards kingship apparent in texts like 1 Samuel 8:1-22 as well as the stance of Israel’s prophets, who generally engaged in rebuking the kings for their failure to live according to the righteousness and justice of God.

In his influential book, *The Prophetic Imagination*, Walter Brueggemann identifies a “royal consciousness” that exists in opposition to “prophetic consciousness”

within the Old Testament. This juxtaposition is somewhat reductionist, but Brueggemann's exposition of the "royal consciousness" has enough historical merit to warrant some consideration, which helps to situate the wisdom literature within its cultural context and within the wider biblical canon. According to Brueggemann, the Solomonic royal program was characterized by the self-serving aim of securing political and economic power for himself and his dynasty. The particular aspects of this program include:

1. A harem, which functions to make political alliance and secure heirs
2. A system of tax districts that secures royal control by displacing and separating tribes and clans
3. A large political bureaucracy, which imitates larger empires and institutionalizes "technical reason"
4. A standing army that does not depend upon national consent or "the rush of God's Spirit"
5. A fascination with wisdom, which imitates great regimes and displays an "effort to rationalize reality, that is, to package it in manageable portions"
6. Conscription of labor to facilitate massive building projects that promote centralized royal power (Brueggemann 24)

For the most part, this description is historically accurate, and it fits the Bible's own denunciation of Solomon's failure to embody the ideal of kingship articulated in Deuteronomy 17:14-20 (cf. 1 Sam. 8:10-18). However, the wisdom literature associated with Solomon is much more complex than Brueggemann here represents it to be. Indeed, this literature itself frequently makes the point that reality cannot be contained

in manageable packages. Moreover, the Yahwist and creational theology in this literature uphold standards of justice and peace that expose the failures of Israel's kings, sometimes even suggesting that injustice is an intrinsic aspect of human government.⁴⁰ In other words, this literature assumes the contemporaneous political reality of kingship but then sets forth a moral and theological vision for the just use of social power which serves both as a criticism of power's abuse and as a positive guide for using it justly. Attending to such nuances yields valuable insight for a Christian account of justice.

Proverbs begins with a prefatory chiasmic poem (1:2-6), and the center of this carefully structured chiasm—indicating the main purpose of the whole book—is three words: righteousness [*tsedeq*], justice [*misphat*], equity [*meyshar*] (1:3). These words are described as the fruit of receiving “instruction in wise dealing,” and their presence at the center of this opening chiasm indicates that the end goal of Proverbs is to create people who live according to these three qualities. The terms frequently occur in collocation with one another, and Vincent Bacote rightly notes that they each describe important aspects of the overall biblical concept of justice (415). They also frequently occur with an array of related words—such as peace, steadfast love, and faithfulness—which connect justice to a constellation of themes. In order to appreciate the fact that Proverbs uses this verbal triad to describe the character of a truly wise person, it is worth taking some time to consider how each of these words is used throughout the Old Testament canon.

The first word in this triad, *tsedeq*—which most modern translations render “righteousness” but which can also be rendered “justice” (as KJV)—is one of the

⁴⁰ For more on the theological framework of the wisdom literature, see Raymond C. Vanleeuwen, “Proverbs.”

central terms of biblical theology. Though David J. Reimer identifies a wide range of meanings for the word in its Old Testament usages, most of these share in common the idea of character or behavior that conforms to some external standard of “rightness.” Though the standard itself is often unstated, it is frequently associated with the moral character of God as revealed in God’s actions and God’s law. Insofar as this law seeks to govern God’s covenantal community, the word “righteousness” is frequently associated with behavior that demonstrates covenantal faithfulness; however, it is also used to describe behaviors that are considered morally right even when the concept of covenant is not in view. Reimer notes that in Proverbs righteous behavior always pleases God, leads to life, and is associated with such patterns of action as honesty, generosity, boldness, mercifulness, loyalty, and steadfastness (757). Similarly, Walter Brueggeman explains that “righteousness” in the Old Testament is most importantly “an ethical term used to mark people who live generatively in the community in order to sustain and enhance the community’s well being” (*Reverberations* 177). This concern for communal flourishing is especially marked by “attentiveness to the poor and needy” (*Reverberations* 177). In addition to this broad, ethical significance, “righteousness” is also employed as a juridical term, referring to the ways that God and human rulers use power to actively intervene in society in a manner that is “designed to restore to well-being creation and the covenantal community” (*Reverberations* 179). Thus, for a human to live in a way that is “righteous” means to embody God’s character in a manner that promotes human flourishing, with a particular emphasis on covenantal faithfulness, caring for the vulnerable, and using social power for the good of others.

The word rendered “justice” in Proverbs 1:3—*mishpat*, which could also be translated “judgment” in this context—has strong juridical connotations. It is frequently used in relation to God or to human rulers who exercise political power or who adjudicate conflicts within a community (Birch 434). Whether employed in a way that refers directly to wielding political power or more broadly to the way that social agency is exercised, Bruce Birch rightly states that there is strong evidence that “doing justice” in the scriptures refers “to actions that help restore balance or wholeness (*shalom*) to community” (434). He proceeds to note the frequency (37x) with which *tsedeq* and *mishpat* occur in conjunction, and he concludes that, taken together, “justice and righteousness describe persons and behaviors that seek wholeness and wellbeing for all, that seek equity in all social interrelationships, and that do not seek advantage at the expense of another’s disadvantage” (435). The emphasis is upon ethical living that results in a fair, flourishing community in which all human beings may thrive.

The third word in the verbal triad of Proverbs 1:3 is “equity” (*meysnar*), which has the basic meaning of “straightness” or “evenness.” It is frequently used in a metaphorical way to refer to human conduct that conforms to ethical norms and spiritual values (Olivier 565). In an extensive study of how this word in all of its forms operates in the Old Testament, Hanne Olivier concludes that the biblical call to equity involves a relationship with God that results in living “according to a new ethos, namely, the principle of justice, which includes among other things the restitution of previous wrongs to other people and the taking care of the less privileged” (565). When applied to God rather than humans, Olivier writes that the biblical concept of “equity” reveals that “God’s righteousness is never to be separated from his compassion and

grace, and that justice essentially means a place in the sun for everyone” (565). This association of justice and equity with compassion and grace is extremely important for understanding the distinctiveness of biblical justice. Moreover, Olivier’s comment that divine justice seeks “a place in the sun for everyone” emphasizes the fact that justice in scripture is oriented towards universal human flourishing in a way that fulfills God’s purpose for the created world.

In the context of Proverbs 1:3, a life of “righteousness, justice, and equity” involves holistic personal transformation as the fruit of a relationship of reverence and faith towards God (cf. 1:7; 3:5). Since these words are used to describe a person who has been “instructed by wisdom,” it should be clear that “wisdom” in this tradition means something much more than pragmatic shrewdness, applied knowledge, or skillful living. Rather, becoming wise involves a renovation of all one’s desires, values, and habits, a dramatic reorientation of the self towards God and other people. A wise person knows God and lives with the grain of God’s creative purposes for the world

This key point is made again in Proverbs’ second chapter, which urges its readers to seek wisdom zealously through prayer and careful study of the teachings of the book (vv. 1-5). When readers do this diligently, they will receive wisdom as a gift from God (v. 6), and this gift will include both an understanding of what it truly means to “fear the Lord” and a true “knowledge of God” (v. 5). As a result of this new relationship with God, the wise will come to “understand righteousness and justice and equity, every good path; for wisdom will come into your heart, and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul” (vv. 9-10). Here the three keywords of 1:3 recur, and they are associated with “every good path.” The metaphor of the path, which is a central element

of Israel's wisdom literature, suggests that "righteousness and justice and equity" are not being considered as abstract concepts but as a way of life. Thus, it is perhaps not surprising that only those who have begun to pursue wisdom in covenantal relationship with God may begin to "understand" what the words mean. Such understanding, in this context, is not merely academic; it is existential. To grow in understanding about justice requires one to walk down the path of justice, receiving knowledge from God along the way. Later in this book, the voice of personified wisdom will say, "I walk in the way of righteousness, in the paths of justice" (8:20), indicating the close connection between wisdom and a lifestyle that is morally and spiritually oriented towards communing with God and acting in a way that brings about God's good purposes for creation. It should thus be no surprise to read towards the end of Proverbs: "Evil men do not understand justice, but those who seek the Lord understand it completely" (28:5). The knowledge of justice, according to this tradition, is acquired gradually, experientially, by those who seek God in humble faith, and who treat others in a way that faithfully reflects God's character.

Of utmost importance is the fact that in Proverbs the path of wisdom—of righteousness, justice, and equity—leads to *shalom*. In the third chapter of the book, personified wisdom is said to bequeath *shalom* as a gift to all her disciples (3:2), and the reader is told that "all her paths are *shalom*" (3:17). These texts are consistent with the observation of Bruce Birch—cited above—that "doing justice" in scripture generally means acting in a way that leads towards communities of wholeness and peace. Unfortunately, the fact that *shalom* is sometimes rendered "prosperity" has led some interpreters to the inadequate conclusion that texts such as Proverbs 3:2 and 3:17 teach

that wealth and health are the inevitable result of living wisely, but this is a massive oversimplification. Proverbs does teach that wisdom is generally more likely than folly to lead towards material wellbeing, but it also claims that possessing wisdom in poverty is preferable to being a wealthy fool. The promise that wisdom grants her disciples *shalom* does not mean that wise living inevitably leads to “success” in a crude or materialistic sense. In fact, the wisdom of this book is much more likely to challenge and redefine its readers’ goals than to give them the skills necessary to achieve whatever ends they might already desire. According to Proverbs, living wisely entails living in accord with God’s good purposes of flourishing for the world, even if this means that one must be content with spiritual joy after pouring out one’s material resources for the good of others. The path of justice that leads to true peace is often a path of poverty.

Reading the book of Proverbs as a whole through the lens of its emphasis upon righteousness, justice, equity, and peace brings major themes into focus. On the negative side, Proverbs warns of divine judgment upon those who disregard the cries of the poor (21:13) or encroach upon the rights of the widow and the fatherless (12:15; 23:10). Such unjust deviations from the path of wisdom destroy communal flourishing. But avoiding acts of oppression is just the beginning. The book frequently enjoins active generosity to the poor. Those who are generous to the poor are pronounced “blessed” (14:21), which is a key sapiential term connoting the God-given vitality of the wise. Proverbs likewise teaches that giving to those in financial need is a way to honor God, and oppressing poor people is a direct affront to their Creator (14:31). In Proverbs—as in the Mosaic Law and the prophetic literature—doing justice involves

particular concern to assist those members of society who are most powerless and vulnerable to exploitation. Moreover, this concern includes not only active generosity aimed at ameliorating the condition of marginalized individuals, but also the application of social power and privilege to secure their protection and advance their flourishing. This latter theme is apparent, for example, in the instructions that King Lemuel's mother gives him in the final chapter of the book. She warns that it is not for kings to be drunk, lest they forget the duties incumbent upon those who possess positions of power and thereby pervert justice (31:4-5). On the contrary, wisdom requires those with social power to use it in a way that actively advances the wellbeing of those who lack it. Here, Lemuel's mother moves into the territory of direct moral exhortation: "Open your mouth for the mute, for the rights of all who are destitute. Open your mouth, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy" (31:8-9). Those who have been taught by wisdom to walk the path of righteousness, justice, and equity know that social privilege and power must be responsibly wielded on behalf of the powerless. The privileged must open their mouths to speak on behalf of the poor and needy who lack the power to speak and be heard for themselves.

It would be wrong, however, to give the impression that Proverbs associates wisdom only with the rich and powerful in a way that could be misappropriated to bolster paternalistic attitudes. Proverbs does not suggest that wisdom leads inevitably to material success or social prominence, nor does it encourage powerful benefactors to see themselves as heroes who graciously protect and assist the inferior masses of humanity. On the contrary, the book frequently contrasts the integrity and wisdom of many poor people with the folly and injustice of many who are rich: "Better is

a poor man who walks in his integrity than a rich man who is crooked in his ways” (28:6). “Better is a little with righteousness than great revenues with injustice” (16:8). “It is better to be of a lowly spirit with the poor than to divide the spoil with the proud” (16:19). These sayings, and others like them, dispel reductive interpretations of Proverbs that equate wisdom with riches in a simplistic fashion. As noted above, the book does teach that—all else being equal—many virtues associated with wisdom (such as diligence, patience, prudence, and self-control) tend to lead to wealth over time, and that the opposite vices associated with folly tend to produce poverty. Proverbs also realistically acknowledges that wealth makes life easier in a great many ways. But the verses quoted above make it clear that these general principles are not a denial of the fact that the world is filled with wise and righteous poor people as well as rich fools who practice injustice. If one must choose, Proverbs clearly teaches that being among the former is better than being among the latter. As Roland Murphy puts it, the book recognizes “that life is not fair, that the just can be poor and the rich be unjust, contrary to a common idea held by perhaps the majority of people” in the ancient Near East (262). In addition to doing justice, wisdom requires us to acknowledge that the world is characterized by injustice, and to reject any value system that considers the rich more worthy than the poor.

In fact, one mark of wise people in Proverbs is their refusal to wear themselves out in the pursuit of wealth, which—despite its great use-value—has no intrinsic worth. This attitude is summed up in 23:4: “Do not toil to acquire wealth; be discerning enough to desist.” Thus, the way of righteousness, justice, and equity is trodden by rich and poor alike, and one of the marks of wisdom is a proper assessment of the relative

value of wealth and power. Neither seeking wealth nor naively romanticizing poverty—both of which states bring their own snares (see 30:8-9)—the wise are disciplined to steward whatever social and economic resources they possess in a way that pursues the flourishing of others, with a particular concern for those who are suffering and oppressed. These observations about Proverbs’ somewhat ambivalent attitude towards wealth also begin to reveal that the principled commitment to doing justice in the Bible’s sapiential literature is not accompanied by any buoyant optimism about the ability of the wise to sort out the world’s problems. On the contrary, the unfairness of the world is flatly acknowledged, and—given this unfairness—living justly in poverty is commended as a superior alternative to unjust prosperity. Here is a conception of the “good life” that is shaped by a balance of high moral standards and hard-nosed realism.

In this light, it is worth considering more closely the statement of Proverbs 28:6 cited above: “Better is a poor man who walks in his integrity than a rich man who is crooked in his ways.” In this text, the metaphor of walking down divergent paths is once again used to teach that wisdom and folly are two radically different ways of being in the world. Here, the path of wisdom is associated with the concept of “integrity” (Heb. *tom*), which has a basic meaning of “completeness.” This is contrasted with “crookedness” (Heb. *iqqesh*), which comes from a root word meaning to knot, twist, pervert, or distort. The former is humanity flourishing according to its true nature: The image of God being expressed through a lifestyle of wisdom and justice. The latter is the corruption of humanity, the privation of God’s image by orienting the self towards lesser goods (such as wealth and power), which is a basic concept of human evil. Proverbs has a holistic conception of the “good life” that would ideally involve moral

and spiritual flourishing as well as material prosperity, but it acknowledges that humans live in a broken world filled with irrationality and injustice, so such dreams of comprehensive flourishing are frequently impossible to achieve. In this state of affairs, the best way to thrive as a human—to walk in “integrity” or “completeness”—is to fellowship with God in a lifestyle of justice, which, among other things, means pursuing the material wellbeing of others even at the expense of one’s own wealth or comfort. The world in its present state is characterized by pervasive injustice, so being just means working against the tide of evil, inequity, and scarcity while entrusting oneself to a God whose justice, wisdom, and power are confessed by faith even when they are not apparent in one’s everyday experience.

These themes are even more pronounced in the other sapiential books of the Old Testament, especially Ecclesiastes. This book offers a powerful corrective to any simplistic reading of Proverbs that might lead one to conclude that the world is basically fair, orderly, and predictable. To the contrary, *Quoheleth*—the mysterious sage or “preacher” whose sayings the book collects—repeatedly asserts that “everything is *hebel*.” This Hebrew word—which appears five times in Ecclesiastes’ second verse and thirty-eight times throughout the book—refers to mist, smoke, or vapor. By stating again and again that all of life is *hebel*, *Quoheleth* suggests that any meaning, justice, or rationality humans might think they perceive in the world turns out to be transient, elusive, or even illusory. In addition to continual rumination on themes such as mortality, human frailty, and the apparently random nature of life, Ecclesiastes frequently returns to the theme that perfectly realizing justice in human societies is impossible. One of the thematic sayings of the book’s first chapter is: “What is crooked

cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be counted” (1:13). Here the familiar themes of “crooked” and “straight” return, but this time the claim is that no amount of wisdom will enable the just to right the world’s wrongs. Many problems cannot be solved, and many wounds cannot be healed. Moreover, the pervasive presence of evil—“what is lacking,” the privation of God’s good creation—is such that the world’s evils cannot even be enumerated, much less overcome by human power. If the wise are committed to doing justice, they must not be naively optimistic about the abiding success of their efforts.

In subsequent chapters, Ecclesiastes continually returns to this theme in ways that must be taken seriously for any attempt to develop a biblical theology of justice. In the book’s third chapter, *Quoheleth* observes: “I saw under the sun that in the place of justice [*mishpat*], even there was wickedness, and in the places of righteousness [*tsedeq*], even there was wickedness. I said in my heart, God will judge [*shaphat*] the righteous and the wicked, for there is a time for every matter and every work” (3:16-17).⁴¹ Here, the sage notes the presence of evil lurking even in those persons and places where one might hope to find strongholds of justice. Rulers who hold their office for the purpose of doing justice are frequently corrupted and self-serving at the expense of the vulnerable. Spiritual leaders who are supposed to teach and exemplify righteousness often exploit their influence for perverse ends. Even among the wise who sincerely strive towards righteousness and justice, there is not one who fully and continually achieves his or her most noble aspirations. Only God has the wisdom, perfect knowledge, and moral integrity to ultimately evaluate human actions and bring justice, and the wise know that the wait for God’s justice often seems interminably long.

⁴¹ *Shaphat* is the primitive root of *misphat*.

Shortly after these sobering remarks, *Quoheleth* utters one of the book's most moving laments. Transitioning from abstract reflections on the pervasive presence of evil to a more concrete consideration of the plight of the exploited, *Quoheleth* states:

Again I saw all the oppressions that are done under the sun. And behold, the tears of the oppressed, and they had no one to comfort them! On the side of their oppressors there was power, and there was no one to comfort them. And I thought the dead who are already dead more fortunate than the living who are still alive. But better than both is he who has not yet been and has not seen the evil deeds that are done under the sun. (4:1-3)

Oppression, rather than justice, is the normal state of affairs “under the sun.” In scripture, the “oppressed” are those who experience preventable suffering—usually associated with material poverty—due to the greed and selfishness of others. Scripture frequently mentions particular segments of society among the oppressed: widows, the fatherless, immigrants, the poor, the blind, prisoners, and the lame. In their vulnerable situation, such persons often appeal to those in positions of civil power for help, but *Quoheleth* observes, with a bitter realism of which Marx is a modern exemplar, that power is on the side of the oppressors. Whatever talk about justice there may be among rulers, the oppressed know well that those who have the power to enact *mishpat* are not generally concerned to help the weak. In a moment of profound humanity, *Quoheleth* invites his readers to “behold the tears of the oppressed.” Stop speaking. Stop acting. Simply observe the pain experienced by the great multitudes of human sufferers. Rather than dismissing or turning from the tears of the oppressed, *Quoheleth* takes it seriously and cries out in the raw emotion of lament that it would be better not to be born into such a world as this.

The themes of oppression, power, and justice appear together again in the next chapter. In a passage of somewhat difficult Hebrew, *Quoheleth* urges his readers not to

be surprised by economic exploitation in a world in which hierarchies of power mean that multiple layers of rulers have an interest in appropriating the fruits of work conducted by the laboring classes. The NET Bible renders this text in a way that makes good contextual sense: “If you see the extortion of the poor, or the perversion of justice and fairness in the government, do not be astonished by the matter. For the high official is watched by a higher official, and there are higher ones over them! The produce of the land is seized by all of them, even the king is served by the fields” (5:8-9). Robert Alter correctly observes that the passage references the “perversion of justice” due to “bureaucratic hierarchy—not an exclusively modern phenomenon—in which rights are easily made wrong” (363). In such a world as this—a world of widespread irrationality, in which *Quoheleth* observes “there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins” (7:20; cf. 7:29; 8:11)—layers of social power almost inevitably lead to layers of exploitation and injustice. The pervasive presence of evil infects not only individuals, but also human societies. Injustice is invariably embedded in the economic and political structures of human communities.

This dose of depressing realism, however, does not lead *Quoheleth* to conclude that pursuing wisdom and justice is pointless. While Ecclesiastes denies that humans will ever have the combination of wisdom, power, and integrity required to bring enduring justice into the world on a large scale, it does affirm twice that God will ultimately bring *mishpat* to bear on all things (11:9; 12:14). These assertions of confidence in the eschatological triumph of divine justice carry with them both a ray of hope and a warning that life without moral boundaries will invite judgment from a God who takes seriously the tears of the oppressed.

Moreover, a life of reverence towards God and obedience to God's just commands is commended as the authentic way of being human. Most modern translations follow the KJV in its rendering of the book's penultimate verse: "Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man" (12:13). However, the word "duty" is absent from the Hebrew text, which could be more literally rendered "this is all men" or "this is the whole of humanity." The impulse of translators to supply an elided key word is understandable, but to modern readers the concept of duty may carry connotations of submission to an arbitrary will, whereas the force here seems to be quite different. Life itself may seem arbitrary—like a wisp of smoke (*hebel*), in which order, purpose, and justice continually elude the grasp even of the wise—and this is why the wise must come to learn the limitations of their power and wisdom. But ordering one's life according to wisdom and justice means allowing one's character and path to be shaped by the divine decrees, in which God's inscrutable justice is revealed in the greatest measure that humans can comprehend. Living with the grain of God's revealed will means conforming to justice and wisdom, allowing God to guide one's path in the way that is truly good. Walking in the way of righteousness, justice, and equity requires the sobering knowledge that evil persists until God's eschatological justice is revealed, combined with the sober resolve to pursue *shalom* steadfastly and with joyful gratitude for the small graces that one finds in this world of *hebel*.

This theme of joyful gratitude recurs throughout Ecclesiastes, in which biting cynicism is strangely wedded to simple delight in the pleasures of life and the givenness of things. In the midst of his iconoclastic assault on all forms of naïve idealism that seek

to escape the brokenness of the world or the inevitability of death, *Quoheleth* repeatedly invites his readers to enjoy the simple pleasures of the present and the work that God has given them to do: “There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God” (1:24). “I perceived that there is nothing better for [the children of men] than to be joyful and to do good as long as they live; also that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil—this is God’s gift to man” (3:12). “Go, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has already approved what you do. Let your garments be always white. Let not oil be lacking on your head. Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain [*hebel*] life that he has given you under the sun, because that is your portion in life Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might” (9:7-10). The wisdom of *Quoheleth* is an odd blend of thoroughgoing skepticism about the lack of any stable meaning or enduring purpose in life that can be perceived by human wisdom, combined with an exhortation to enjoy life’s simple pleasures—food, drink, creative work, meaningful human relationship—and exert oneself vigorously to “do good,” to labor with all one’s might at whatever God has given one to do. This repeated affirmation of sober-minded joy and vigorous, creative effort to do good, when combined with *Quoheleth*’s repeated expressions of confidence in the ultimate triumph of God’s presently inscrutable justice, prevent Ecclesiastes from sliding into despairing pessimism. Instead, the book’s tone could be described as “hopeful realism.” To walk the way of wisdom means taking seriously the pervasive power of evil, but joyfully partnering with God in the creative work of resisting evil and pursuing justice in a broken world.

Without reducing the obvious tensions between the thematic emphases of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, it is possible to identify some complementary patterns of thought regarding the relationships between wisdom and justice in the two books. First, they underscore the fact that justice is not easy to identify or to find exemplified in human society. It is a somewhat mysterious concept, rooted in God's character and purposes for the world, and its meaning can only be discovered by those who make the existential commitment to walk with God down a path that resists the practices of exploitation and oppression that tend to dominate human cultures. This means working in practical ways to ameliorate the sufferings of the marginalized and to wield social power in a way that is conducive to the flourishing of all persons in the community. Such work includes holding accountable those who abuse power, listening to and speaking on the behalf of those whom the powerful tend to silence, and generously laboring to promote the wellbeing of those who are most vulnerable. Whereas "justice" in most Western philosophy means doling out rewards and punishments according to the merits of individuals, the emphasis here is placed upon living with the grain of God's creative purpose to cultivate a world in which all of his image bearers can thrive. Such efforts are not bolstered by any naïve optimism about eradicating suffering from the human experience, but neither are they weighed down by despairing pessimism. Rather, the work of justice is sustained by the joyful conviction that God is good and God's purposes of comprehensive flourishing in the created order will eventually triumph.

3.6. Justice, Eschatology, and the Peace of Christ

I have argued that a life of righteousness and justice, according to scripture, is a life characterized by attitudes, actions, and words that move the world towards the wholeness for which God has created it. “Doing justice” is thus directly related to “sowing shalom.” As Bruce Birch observes, the verb which is the primitive root of *mishpat* “refers to actions that help restore balance or wholeness (*shalom*) to community” (434). Paul Louis Metzger helpfully confirms that biblical justice “flows from the heart of God,” who “is concerned with making every realm of his creation whole.” In many biblical passages, God’s righteousness and justice are said to be manifest in his actions that overcome every form of oppression and sorrow in order to bring creation into the joyful peace of God. For example, Psalm 146 first describes God as the creator “who made heaven and earth, the sea and all that is in them” (6), and then tells readers that the creator is the same God “who keeps faith forever; who executes justice for the oppressed, who gives food to the hungry” (6-7). The theme of faithfulness (“who keeps faith forever”) emphasizes the continuity between creation and executing justice. God’s purposes have not changed; he is faithfully intervening to bring creation to the ends for which he made it. The nature of this creative activity is described in the following verses:

The Lord sets the prisoners free;
the Lord opens the eyes of the blind.
The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down;
the Lord loves the righteous.
The Lord watches over the sojourners;
he upholds the widow and the fatherless,
but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin. (7-9)

When God “executes justice,” he intervenes to assist the vulnerable, the suffering, the oppressed, and the innocent, thus bringing the deeds of the wicked to ruin. God’s justice

restores wholeness in the community, casing out evil and establishing *shalom*. The final verse of the Psalm connects this activity with God’s “reign” as the king of heaven and earth, demonstrating a key biblical theme: The manifestation of God’s kingdom means the intervention of divine power to bring justice and peace into the world.⁴²

In order to tease out some of the conceptual implications of this biblical connection between justice and peace, it is helpful to consider Nicholas Wolterstorff’s distinction between the concepts of “primary justice” and “rectifying justice” (*Justice: Rights and Wrongs* ix-x). To begin with, Wolterstorff uses “primary justice” as shorthand for the combination of distributive and commutative justice. Thus, it signifies the positive state of affairs in which a society or institution might be called “just.” To put Wolterstorff’s term within the biblical-theological framework that I have been developing, “primary justice”—in its fullest sense—refers to a situation in which every created thing flourishes according to its kind and is properly related to every other created thing and to God.⁴³ This is to say, “primary justice” is *shalom*. Scripture gives us glimpses of such comprehensive flourishing in the protological description of the Garden of Eden and in the eschatological descriptions of God’s new creation that run throughout the Old Testament prophets and the book of Revelation (see Genesis 2; Isaiah 25:6-9; Micah 4:1-4; Revelation 21:1-7). The Mosaic Law—with its persistent emphasis upon treating the vulnerable with compassion and instituting social policies

⁴² In “Psalms,” J. Clinton McCann Jr. argues persuasively that Yahweh’s reign of righteousness and justice is among the dominant themes of the psalter, shaping the theological vision of the collection as a whole. See also Willem VanGemeren highlights God’s righteous and just acts as a king in Zion in his exposition of Psalm 146 in *Psalms*, 992-996.

⁴³ Though I find Wolterstorff’s basic distinction between primary and rectifying justice helpful, my own approach to thinking about justice does differ from his in some important ways. Most notably, I do not want to think of justice exclusively in terms of rights, wrongs, and duties; rather, I think a narrative approach to Christian ethics—such as that sketched out by Hauerwas (1983)—allows the scriptural story to integrate insights that are often seen as competitive theories in the deontological and teleological traditions of moral reasoning as well as the tradition of virtue ethics. I return to this theme below.

that would have made perpetual, multi-generation poverty impossible if they were ever carried out—sought to give a partial blueprint for a society characterized by “primary justice” within the historical and cultural context of the ancient Near East. Likewise, the New Testament sets Christians’ hopes on primary justice when it points towards the coming of God’s kingdom and the reconciliation of all things in Christ. But such a vision of “primary justice” is very far removed from humans’ daily experience of the world as it is. The world is marred by violence, hatred, and exploitation. Evil is pervasive, and yet most humans experience a deep yearning for a world in which everyone truly flourishes in the way that scripture describes. When we call something “unjust,” we are noting the mismatch between the world for which we long and the world in which we live.

Whenever humans try to make our world more like the world of peace and harmony that we long for and that scripture describes, we are practicing what Wolterstoff refers to as “rectifying justice.” The Bible frequently calls God’s people to this task, which begins with personal repentance (for the doctrine of sin tells us that the world’s brokenness starts inside ourselves) and then moves outwards to pursue a world in which God’s compassion and justice are expressed towards all people, especially those who are most vulnerable. This movement from personal repentance to earthly justice-work is apparent, for example, in Isaiah 1:16-17: “Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause.” Turning from evil within oneself and receiving God’s cleansing grace leads to an outward motion to bring God’s grace and justice to bear in the world.

Both my exposition of Ecclesiastes and my comments about the kingdom of God should make it clear that thinking biblically about primary and rectifying justice brings Christian ethics into contact with eschatology. In my earlier discussion of Ecclesiastes, I note that the book offers a sobering rebuke to all utopian idealists who think they will “make straight” the pervasive “crookedness” of the world, yet it also urges the wise to do good with resilient faith that God will bring his justice to bear on all creation. In the prophetic writings of the Old Testament, this future era in which God’s justice will triumph is described with powerful figurative language as a time in which God prevails over all forces of evil, judges the wicked, pours out his Spirit upon the repentant, and ushers in an era of universal peace, prosperity, and joy. This future day of justice and peace becomes associated with themes—such as the coming of God’s kingdom and the creation of a new heavens and earth—which echo throughout the prophetic books of the Hebrew scriptures.⁴⁴

The writers of the New Testament declare that God’s kingdom has broken into the world to renew creation with the incarnation of Christ. Jesus’ various miracles—healing the sick, driving out evil spirits, raising the dead, turning water to wine, calming the chaotic sea, multiplying bread to feed the hungry—are all signs that he embodies the new age, the long-awaited restoration of God’s *shalom*. The New Testament likewise associates further in-breakings of God’s good future with Christ’s death, resurrection, ascension, and session, as well as the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

Because the kingdom of God has come into the world, disciples of Jesus have reasons to be more up-beat than *Quoheleth*. Nonetheless, Christians still await the final triumph of

⁴⁴ For an excellent introduction to the prophetic literature of the Old Testament, which includes a helpful analysis on the connection between prophetic eschatology and ethics, see Willem VanGemeren, especially 212-246, 354-390.

God's good purposes with the second coming of Christ. Thus, the life of discipleship is suspended in a "time between the times." To receive the gift of the Spirit by faith in Christ is to enjoy the peace of God's new world while remaining inextricably embedded in the "present evil age."⁴⁵ Doing justice and making peace in such a time as this requires Christians to reject both glib optimism (because the present evil age persists) and despairing pessimism (because God's new age has dawned). Rather, as simultaneous inhabitants of two overlapping "times"—one in rebellion against God's eternal peace and the other infused with it—Christians' characteristic attitude towards the world ought to be one of hopeful realism.

The epistles of Paul are replete with ruminations on the Christian's position within the inaugurated but not-yet-consummated kingdom of God.⁴⁶ Some reflections on this theme in Paul's letter to the Ephesians may help illuminate my point. The letter begins with a long Greek sentence (1:2-14) in which Paul maps a panoramic view of the

⁴⁵ The watershed text defending this "time between the times" approach to New Testament eschatology, which has become widely accepted among many New Testament scholars, is George Eldon Ladd's *The Presence of the Future: The Eschatology of Biblical Realism*. See also Ladd's helpful *Gospel of the Kingdom: Scriptural Studies in the Kingdom of God*.

⁴⁶ Paul's emphasis on the death and resurrection of Christ as the inauguration of God's kingdom, constituting a new meaning of history, has sparked significant recent interest among secular continental philosophers. For example, Alain Badiou, in *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, draws upon this theme in Paul's epistle to the Romans in order to develop Badiou's philosophy of "the event": a disruptive historical occurrence that may be received as constituting a new, universally valid "truth." Badiou sees the death and resurrection of Christ as a myth, which Paul takes as an "event," and he draws upon Paul's thought to argue that political revolution may be understood in an analogous way as a historical event that constitutes a new universal truth. In "Paul and the Truth Event," Slavoj Žižek draws upon Badiou's interpretation of the "Christ event" in Paul and adds an analysis of Paul's teaching that this event abrogates the Mosaic law. Incorporating this into his Hegelian/Marxian/Lacanian framework, Žižek reads Paul as discovering the necessity of casting off the law—which he associates with the Lacanian "word of the Father," the Freudian "super ego," and every attempt to impose an order on human life—and embrace the void, which creates the possibility for a revolutionary new embodiment of love. John Milbank has written excellent critical summaries and responses to Badiou and Žižek in various essays, two of which are in *Paul's New Moment: Continental Philosophy and Recent Christian Theology*. N.T. Wright—the world's leading Pauline scholar—offers a brief summary and assessment of these new approaches, placing them within the wider contemporary revival of interest in Paul, in his sweeping survey *Paul and His Recent Interpreters*, 305-346.

Father, Son, and Spirit's saving acts in history.⁴⁷ The climax to which the Father's redemptive work aims is "to unite all things in [Christ], things in heaven and things on earth" (1:10). Jesus has already begun this work of cosmic reconciliation and reunification through his death on the cross, which makes it possible for those who trust in him to be forgiven of their sins and adopted into God's covenantal family, wherein they become co-heirs with Christ of the fully-restored heavens and earth that are yet to come (1:4-7). However, a foretaste of this future is already experienced by Christians through the gift of the Spirit. To the believing community at Ephesus, Paul writes: "And you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in [Christ], were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory" (1:13-14). The Greek word rendered "guarantee" here is *arrhabon*, a technical financial term referring to part of a purchase price that is paid in advance. This sum was not only a "pledge" or "guarantee" of future payment; it was also the first installment of the purchase price. Likewise, the Spirit of God indwelling those who trust in Christ is both the beginning of God's new creation and the promise of further things to come. The Spirit is the partial in-breaking of God's eschatological peace, bringing heaven into contact with earth, and establishing the beginnings of God's future in the present.⁴⁸

Both of these aspects of Pauline eschatology—the first fruits of God's reconciled cosmos in the present and its fuller realization in the future—play an

⁴⁷ For a detailed, well-informed, and helpful exegesis of this important Pauline passage, see Harold Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary*, 153-246.

⁴⁸ For helpful and accessible recent studies on this connection between eschatology and ethics—making the future present in the power of the Spirit—see N.T. Wright's *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection and the Mission of the Church*, as well as David P. Gushee and Glen Stassen's *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Contexts*.

important role in the theological and ethical vision that is worked out in the rest of the letter. According to Ephesians, Christians have the present experience of being resurrected and recreated with Christ, seated with Christ on his heavenly throne, enlightened and empowered by the Spirit for a life of wisdom and holiness. In addition to these experiences of personal transformation, Christians also experience incorporation into a new community. They are united in one body, enjoying a fellowship of peace with God and with the transcultural communion of saints:

For [Jesus] himself is our peace, who has made [Jews and Gentiles] one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man [Gk. *anthropos*: man/humanity] in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. (Eph. 2:14-18)

The church—God’s new humanity in Christ—is the multi-ethnic community of peace, endowed with the divine Spirit. The Spirit dwelling in this community directs and empowers it for a life in imitation of God’s revealed character, a life of justice, faithfulness, compassion, and love that transforms every human relationship (Eph. 4:1-6:9). But such a life must be lived in the midst of a badly corrupted creation in which chaos and senseless suffering are everyday realities. Evil marks “the course of the world,” which is dominated by “the prince of the power of the air” (Eph. 2:2). The destructive, demonic impulses at work in human cultures also remain at work in the church and all of its members, which is why Paul urges Christians continually to put off the “old humanity” and put on the “new humanity,” in which the image of God is being restored (Eph. 4:22-24). In the climax of this epistle, Paul charges the church to wage war against the evil that lurks within itself and predominates in the “present evil age”

(Ephesians 6:10-20). The “gospel of peace” requires those who believe it to be continually ready for conflict with the forces of evil in all of their forms (6:25). Fighting for peace is the *modus operandi* for Christians living in the time between the times.

These eschatological themes are also apparent in the life and teaching of Jesus as recorded in the canonical gospels. For the early Christian communities living in the midst of a violent Roman empire—in which they possessed no political agency, and by which they were intermittently persecuted—the stories of Jesus became the source for a radically new orientation to the world, in which these communities came to see themselves citizens and ambassadors of God’s in-breaking kingdom, extending the mission of Jesus in the midst of a corrupt age. At the birth of Christ, Luke’s gospel describes hosts of angels singing: “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!” (2:14). The advent of Jesus is the advent of God’s eschatological *shalom* among his people. And yet, the same gospel later reports these words of Jesus: “Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division” (Lk. 12:51). The inauguration of God’s kingdom of peace is likewise a declaration of war against a world system in which injustice prevails.

And yet the newness of God’s new era is apparent even in the manner by which Jesus wages war against injustice. At a crucial moment of Matthew’s gospel, Jesus sees the looming conflict between his followers and the Jerusalem establishment that his teaching has continually provoked. But rather than stirring up the crowds who follow him to a popular revolt, he urges them to keep his power a secret (12:16), and rather than openly confronting his enemies, he withdraws from the public view (12:15). The

narrator at this point interrupts the story to explain Jesus' actions with a quotation from Isaiah:

Behold, my servant whom I have chosen,
my beloved with whom my soul is well pleased.
I will put my Spirit upon him,
and he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles.
He will not quarrel or cry aloud,
nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets;
a bruised reed he will not break,
and a smoldering wick he will not quench,
until he brings justice to victory;
and in his name the Gentiles will hope. (Mt. 12:18-21; cf. Isa. 42:1-4)

Jesus is God's servant, empowered by the Spirit to "proclaim justice to the Gentiles."

But he does more than proclaim God's justice to all nations; his mission is not complete until he has actually brought "justice to victory." The triumph of justice—the instantiation of universal *shalom*—is his ultimate end, and this means a confrontation with the destructive powers of evil in the world. And yet the manner of this confrontation is itself a radical departure from the world's destructive patterns, the beginning of something new. The hope of the nations is placed in a divine warrior whose manner of overthrowing evil is itself peaceable. He is not quarrelsome. His voice is quiet in the street. The Messianic power is of a kind that neither breaks a bent reed nor snuffs out a flickering candle. In Christ's methods of resisting evil, the new era of *shalom* is already present.

In the next chapter, I explore in more detail this theme of peaceable resistance to injustice as it relates to Christ's command to love one's enemies. This enemy-love—embodied most fully in the self-giving death of Jesus on the cross—is portrayed in the New Testament as the turning point of cosmic history and the ultimate act of divine peacemaking. At present, however, I simply emphasize the following points. First,

throughout the Christian scriptures, the dominant idea associated with justice is not “giving to each his due,” but rather acting in a way that moves towards comprehensive flourishing at the communal level. As I attempt to clarify below, this does sometimes involve punishing evil actions, and it certainly includes treating all persons in a way that befits their inherent dignity and properly rewards their good actions. However, the dominant biblical framework is pursuing the common good rather than weighing and balancing the relative merits of individuals. Second, the goal of communal flourishing towards which acts of justice aim—“primary justice” in Wolterstorff’s vocabulary and *shalom* in the language of the bible—is eschatological. This means that final, perfect, universal justice can only be received as a gift from God, and Christians expect to receive this gift at the end of history, when Christ returns to recreate the heavens and the earth. However, it would be a catastrophic mistake to think this means that there is no hope for justice in the present. On the contrary, the New Testament repeatedly declares that God’s future era of justice and peace is already present in the world through Jesus and the Spirit. The church is called to embody this peace in its own internal relations, and the church’s prayer—“Your kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven”—is a plea that God’s eschatological reign would be further manifested on earth, here and now. Moreover, the “good works” to which scripture frequently exhorts Christians, are deeds of “rectifying justice,” actions that seek to establish God’s purposes of peace and wholeness in the world. Third, doing such actions requires the hard and risky task of imagining what “wholeness” and “communal flourishing” might mean. The work of rectifying justice presupposes some vision of primary justice, and this calls for the cultivation of a disciplined imagination, trained to dream resilient

dreams of *shalom* in a world of tribalism, self-interest, and the raw conflict of power with power.

3.7. Prophetic Imagination and the Problem of Utopia

Contemporary cultural theory is haunted by the specter of utopia. In general, conservatism feeds on the memory of real or imaginary golden ages from the past, and progressivism is fueled by dreams of a golden age in the future. However, in contemporary Western culture, all utopian dreaming is vulnerable to skepticism and disillusionment, what Jean-François Lyotard labeled the “incredulity towards metanarratives” that is an endemic aspect of the postmodern condition (xxiv).

Progressive social movements of the last two centuries have succeeded sufficiently to cultivate a widespread sentiment of disdain towards past eras in which racial injustice and oppressive forms of patriarchy were openly condoned by the general public. In addition, the secular left still carries a Marxian penchant for representing all history as the history of various evolving forms of exploitation. Moreover, these assaults upon conservative dreams of a utopian golden age in the past are matched by a corresponding doubt that any such age will be achieved in the future. The failure of progressive movements to attain equality or even resolve the palpable antagonisms between various demographic groups in the West has contributed somewhat to this suspicion of utopia, as have the various oppressive regimes established by communist revolutions that were fueled by utopian visions of a world free from class difference. Among cultural theorists of the Left, one can sense a deep tension between lingering Marxian skepticism towards incremental, ameliorative social reforms (which are still seen as so many efforts to

bolster the existing order) and even deeper skepticism towards the idea of revolution (which is no longer sustained by faith in the dialectical progress of history towards its class-free *telos*). Even when reform and revolution have been replaced by the more modest (and often facile) goal of resistance, the Left seems tormented by a Foucauldian suspicion that acts of resistance are always already contained within an existing network of power for which there is no “outside.” For all these reasons and more, the projects of discovering, inventing, or believing in a “perfect world” have fallen on hard times. The etymological pun of utopia is felt more palpably than ever: the “good place” (*eu-topos*) is “no place” (*ou-topos*).

For the most part, I consider this disillusionment to be a congenial development. Few ideas are more dangerous than the idea that one has imagined the perfect social order and has the power to bring it into being. Besides the inherent arrogance of such a notion, it is likely to motivate willful deafness to all one’s critics and to provide potent justification for the use of questionable means to achieve such a desirable end. However, rejecting the idea that any human or group of humans has the capacity to conjure an exhaustive vision of the perfect world does not entail rejecting the project of imagining and pursuing a better world.

For example, I could claim that most people on the planet would prefer a world in which nations no longer war and all humans have access both to creative work and to healthy food. Without recourse to empirical support for my claim, I venture to assert that many people would find it intuitively plausible. I could even press this point further by arguing that such a world would not only be *preferable*, but that it would be a *better* world than the one that in fact exists at present. By thus moving from the language of

preference to that of value, I would certainly lose some poststructuralists, pragmatists, and radical relativists, but I suspect that a high percentage of the human population would still grant my claim. By doing so, they would be tacitly admitting that access to creative work and healthy food are common goods—universal aspects of human flourishing—and that wars are in some way a privation of the common good. To claim that “A” would be a better world than “B” seems to entail an assumption that “A” more closely approximates some ideal of human flourishing than “B.” As descriptions of possible better worlds become more specific and detailed, they also imply more specific and detailed assumptions about the nature of human flourishing as such, which is to say that they carry increasingly vivid dreams of utopia. In my own case, I find that even hardnosed skepticism towards the pretensions of utopian dreamers cannot quite erase the conviction that a positive vision of human flourishing is both justifiable and necessary for redemptive social action.

To put this another way, the concept of justice I have been expounding is irreducibly and unapologetically teleological. To do justice is to pursue communities of *shalom*, which instantiate the social goods of which all social evils are a mere privation. This positive conception of communal wellbeing is implicit not only within all modest hopes for a better world but also within all forms of social criticism. To criticize a world in which laborers are exploited is implicitly to claim that laborers ought to enjoy the fruits of their work, that this enjoyment is a positive social good, an aspect of “primary justice.” As I argued in the previous chapter, social criticism—the denunciation of evils—must be accompanied by the more challenging work of naming and pursuing goods if it is to be ultimately redemptive.

In fact, the unabashedly utopian character of early Marxism was a great deal of its power, and the total inability to imagine any positive vision of the human good is the primary reason why most postmodern critics of Marxism have possessed no equivalent power. However, the embarrassment of many contemporary Marxists about this aspect of their own tradition is palpable. The final chapter of Frederic Jameson's *The Political Unconscious* is a famous case in point. In the middle of this chapter, Jameson draws upon Paul Ricoeur's concept of "meaning" discerned by "positive hermeneutics" and Ernest Bloch's theory of hope in order to reassert the value of "the oldest Utopian longings of mankind" (284-287), which are discernable in almost all cultural artifacts. Even in advertisements—the most banal cultural products of consumer capitalism—one may discern positive traces of counter-hegemonic longings for a better world than the current order.⁴⁹ However, Jameson concludes the book by drawing upon Walter Benjamin to reassert "the undiminished power of ideological distortion that persists even with the restored Utopian meanings of cultural artifacts" (299). Just as valuable longings for a better world can be discerned in even the most ideological text, so the most redemptive texts contain certain "complicity with privilege and class domination, stained with the guilt not merely of culture in particular but of History itself as one long nightmare" (299). One need not agree with all of Jameson's claims or accept the historical materialism undergirding his Marxist cultural hermeneutic in order to note the resemblance between this line of reasoning and the wisdom literature of the Old Testament. On one hand, a persistent longing for Utopia, for a just and flourishing society, seems to be present in nearly all human cultures; on the other hand, all who

⁴⁹ Jameson's controversial 2016 essay *An American Utopia* builds on this important theme by sketching out one alternative vision to global capitalism. Though I differ from many of Jameson's views here, I welcome the attempt to continue thinking in public about better ways of being human.

reach for perfect justice, wisdom, or peaceful order in this world will find that they are grasping smoke.

There is a need for cultivating a disciplined capacity for imagining and pursuing better worlds that avoids both the temptations of hubris and despair. No finite creature or community of creatures should be so arrogant as to think it has a “God’s-eye-view” of the world as it ought to be, a perfect vision of utopia. This hubristic over-estimation of the wisdom and justness of one’s social vision almost inevitably leads to the equally arrogant notion that one has the right to impose this vision upon others. The tendency to justify violent religious coercion is perhaps the most typical Christian version of this sin, and the gross bloodshed of utopian revolutionaries (who inevitably fail to establish utopia) is perhaps its typical secular form. However, the opposite error of despair—of failing to criticize the status quo and hope for a better world—is also unacceptable. To give in to this temptation would be to grant one tacit approval of a world order characterized by gross economic inequities, perpetual war, and the exploitation of the many by the few. From a Christian standpoint, this cannot be. Disciples of Jesus are marked by grieving for the brokenness of the world (Matt. 5:4), acknowledging their complicity in this brokenness (Matt. 5:3), hungering for the manifestation of God’s righteousness (Matt. 5:6), and working to cultivate *shalom* (Matt. 5:9) even at great personal cost (Matt. 5:10). When the church embodies these marks of discipleship by the power of the Spirit, it bears witness to God’s future kingdom and begins to make the future present. Rather than succumbing to the temptations of hubris or despair, the urgent task for today is to keep dreaming boldly of better worlds while remembering

that all such dreams are partial, incomplete, awaiting the judgment, grace, and fulfillment of God.

What is needed to sustain this kind of social vision is the discipline of prophetic imagination. This term—which I am loosely appropriating from Walter Brueggemann—has three parts. First, it is an act of *imagination*, of creatively envisioning states of affairs other than those the currently exist.⁵⁰ It is all too easy for cultural theory to get trapped in false dilemmas (say, between conservatism and progressivism or neoliberalism and Marxism) simply because of failure to think beyond the boundaries of what is or has been. But dreaming of *shalom* requires the play of intellectual freedom and creativity that is not so constrained. Second, this creativity is *disciplined*. In scripture, the wise and creative exercise of power to cultivate the world's potentialities is an inherent part of what it means to be human, to bear the image of God; however, this exercise of human agency is only life-giving if it is a faithful response to the initiating wisdom of God. In the previous chapter I have argued that the quest for absolute autonomy—for self-expression that is utterly unhindered—is ultimately the drive for total annihilation, for all of reality turns out to limit the exercise of individual will. Thus, the imagination must be trained, disciplined to work in sync with divine wisdom insofar as it has been revealed. Third, the nature of this discipline is contained in the word *prophetic*. In scripture, prophets speak the words of God to the world and its various powers. The discipline of prophetic imagination for which I am calling is rooted in and shaped by this tradition: It begins with the word of God and

⁵⁰ Though the concept of imagination is out of style in contemporary cultural theory, the theme of “dreaming” and “imagining” a better world are woven deeply into the Anglo-African theological tradition. In addition to Martin Luther King Jr.’s famous “I Have a Dream” speech, one could point to Desmond Tutu’s recent book *God Has a Dream: A Vision of Hope for our Time* or John M. Perkins’ memoirs *Dream With Me: Race, Love, and the Struggle We Must Win*.

moves out into the world. This is not to say that contemporary Christians can claim to speak with divine authority that is analogous to the prophets of Israel or the apostles of Christ; rather, I mean precisely that the divine word as disclosed during these unique moments of salvation-history and recorded in scripture is the source, guide, and boundary of our social imagination. We receive the scriptures as God's word of judgment and grace upon ourselves, which calls for our faithful response, including the response of bearing public witness to what we have heard. With this basic framework in place, I am in a position to suggest more fully the shape that this discipline of prophetic imagination should take.

First, we need an imagination that is rooted in the canon of scripture. Only the word of God has the power to tear down strongholds of folly and oppression while moving human hearts towards the peace that God intends for his creation. And only God's truth revealed in the scriptures has the power to set Christians apart from the cultural milieu to which they would otherwise be conformed. Though Christians may disagree on many matters of political policy, we must take careful heed to scriptural mandates that we exercise faithful stewardship of creation in the midst of our ecological crises, extend God's mercy and justice towards the stranger in the midst of immigration crises, uphold the sacredness of vulnerable human life in the midst of our abortion crises, and embody dignified self-control and fidelity in the midst of our crises of excessive sexual self-expression. The word of God calls us to stand by moral convictions that transcend our partisan politics.

Second, we need an imagination that is characterized by catholic sensibility. If we are going to hear the whole word of God, we need to read it in communion with the

saints throughout the ages, throughout the nations, and across every demographic boundary in our own contexts. I have repeatedly had my interpretations of scripture challenged by African, South American, and Asian Christians who did not read God's word with my American cultural lenses. Likewise, I have often witnessed American Christians radically rethinking their social and political commitment after reading ancient Christian texts or attending a Bible study in which black, white, Hispanic, Native American, male, female, rich and poor all discussed God's word together. We must be open to God's Spirit working through the diverse manifestations of the church to help us see new things in the scriptures. Only in this way can we avoid being limited by a social imagination that is too-predictably tied to our cultural, ethnic, and socio-economic situations. This involves the discipline of listening, with a special concern to hear and amplify the voices of those who are often silenced. Scripture repeatedly emphasizes the wisdom that is gained through this kind of listening (Prov. 18:13, 17; 21:13; 31:8-9; Jas. 1:19), and wise dreams of human flourishing can only be achieved through such processes of open dialogue.

Third, we need an imagination that is sustained by Christocentric hope. At a basic level, this means that we will not set our hopes ultimately on political parties or leaders who will inevitably lack the wisdom and power to make our dreams come true. Only Jesus Christ can bring real freedom, joy, peace, and reconciliation. Further, setting our hopes on Jesus guards us against naïve optimism and despairing pessimism. Whereas optimism tends to think that things will probably get better because humans are moving in the right direction, Christian hope stands in judgment on the present while looking forward to God's mighty acts in the future. And whereas pessimism tends

to say things are so bad that it is useless to pursue a better world, Christian hope reminds us that the resurrected Lord Jesus already reigns in his cosmos and works through the Spirit dwelling in the church. With our hopes set on Jesus, we can develop a social imagination that seeks to envision and cultivate God's peaceable kingdom on earth even as we take serious account of sin and the spiritual forces of evil. Christians do not believe that the peace of God will be fully and finally established until the *eschaton*, but we do pray and work for the present manifestation of God's "kingdom on earth as it is in heaven" by seeking to move our communities and the world towards a closer approximation of the peace of Christ.

In addition to outlining these three ways characteristics of a disciplined prophetic imagination, it is helpful to recall some of the particular contours of the scriptural vision of *shalom*. One prophetic passage that has exerted significant influence on the imaginations of many Christian peacemakers, including the leaders of the American Civil Rights movement, comes from the prophet Micah::

[God] shall judge between many peoples,
and shall decide disputes for strong nations far away;
and they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war anymore;
but they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree,
and no one shall make them afraid,
for the mouth of the LORD of hosts has spoken. (Micah 4:3-4)

Many theories of justice have emphasized the role of the sword, which Lady Justice classically bears in her right hand, but the prophecy of Micah is a powerful reminder that the triumph of justice is the end of all swords. With God settling the disputes between warring nations and bringing them into a peaceable accord, the destructive tools

of war are transformed into creative tools that are used to cultivate the riches of the earth. The result is universal abundance (“every man under his vine...and fig tree”)—not as a result of state-coerced renunciation of private property, but as a result of peaceful cooperation—and the freedom from all fear.

Another biblical passage that has proved to be fuel for the prophetic imaginations of Christian peacemakers is the famous vision of the heavenly city in Revelation 21:1-4. This text describes a new creation of universal peace, in which the city of God has descended to a renewed earth. The picture is not one of transcending materiality, but rather one of heavenly justice and peace descending to transform the material order of creation. The light of God—symbolic of wisdom, truth, and joy—brings an end to the warring of the nations. But the nations themselves—in all of their difference—still exist. The text does not describe homogeneous, totalizing social order in which cultural difference has been erased. Rather, it pictures a plurality of kingdoms freely bringing offerings from their distinctive cultural goods as tribute to the divine King. Evil has been excluded, but difference has not. The glory and honor of the nations here is a diverse glory: the abundance of God’s earth drawn forth by the great multitude of tribes, tongues, and nations (cf. Rev7:9) and brought before the King whose infinite glory calls forth a never-ending proliferation of finite glories from his image bearers.

Christians dreaming of justice in line with this biblical tradition should be wary of associating God’s kingdom with any single form of political, economic, and cultural order. Wherever communities of mutual love and respect are caring for one another, creatively cultivating beauty from the raw material of God’s cosmos, and freely giving the fruits of this creativity to one another and to God, the kingdom of heaven is present.

Thus, Christians should not fear or seek to suppress cultural difference. Instead they should embrace it as a finite signification of the infinite fecundity of the triune life that is the ground of all being.

In this respect, Augustine's *City of God* is a helpful touchstone. For Augustine, the Christian community uses the same earthly goods as the non-Christian world—the “things necessary to this life,” such as food, shelter, and clothing, which are conducive of earthly peace—though Christians seek to direct these goods towards a greater end: namely, the eternal peace of loving communion with God (XIX, 17). The fact that all people, Christian and non-Christian, need the same earthly goods means that Christians should be able to participate fully and willingly in civic life—motivated by love for God and neighbor—even in the midst of a non-Christian culture. Moreover, the fact that earthly goods may be secured by any number of social configurations means that Christians should embrace diverse forms of cultural organization, never conflating the kingdom of God with any single way of organizing civic life. As Augustine puts it:

This heavenly city [the church], then, while it sojourns on earth, calls citizens out of all nations, and gathers together a society of pilgrims of all languages, not scrupling about diversities in the manners, laws, and institutions whereby earthly peace is secured and maintained, but recognizing that, however various these are, they all tend to one and the same end of earthly peace. It therefore is so far from rescinding and abolishing these diversities, that it even preserves and adopts them, so long only as no hindrance to the worship of the one supreme and true God is thus introduced. (XIX, 17)

The church is a pilgrim city, a polis composed of people from all nations, which hopes for eternal peace even as it embraces the diverse cultural forms by which humans seek to secure the proximate good of earthly peace. Far from “abolishing” cultural “diversities,” the church should embrace these, and work within every human culture in which it dwells to direct life towards both earthly and eternal peace.

Finally, it is imperative to note that the kind of prophetic imagination I am describing is a work that is never done. No humans should ever believe that they have envisioned the final, total realization of *shalom*, not only because of the limitations of sin and cultural-situatedness, but also because God's infinite peace is capable of generating ever-increasing, ever-expanding manifestations of creaturely flourishing. Even in the consummated eschaton, the dynamic, dialogical, communal work of imagining and pursuing human good may be unending. Communities of love are perpetually generative, and thus beloved community can continually grow and change. As Gerard Manley Hopkins puts it in "Pied Beauty," "All things counter, original, spare, strange" are fathered-forth by the wisdom of God, "whose beauty is past change." Consequently, God's image bearers can continue for ages the creative work of imagining and reimagining new ways of being human that reflect God's glory.

3.8. Rectifying Justice as Judgment and Grace

It is not enough to imagine the positive state of communal flourishing that I have been calling "primary justice." Christian discipleship also involves the work of "rectifying justice," of righting wrongs and actively pursuing better approximations of *shalom* within the world here and now. To develop this idea requires marking carefully the differences between justice in scripture and in the mainstream of the Western philosophical tradition. If we were to accept the dominant idea associated with justice as "allocating to each his due," then the tasks of rectifying justice would consist primarily of doling out fitting punishments to wrongdoers and rewards to well-doers. From the

Christian perspective, this would make the proclamation that God is just very bad news. According to the biblical standard of moral righteousness, God's "allocating to each his due" would simply mean that all humans would be condemned: consumed by divine holiness. However, the Bible does not speak of divine justice in such a simplistic way, and the frequency with which some Christian preachers speak thus reflects the degree to which an imported philosophical conception can hinder our capacity to attend to the details of many biblical texts. In scripture, God's justice is consistently said to be manifest in both the judgment and the grace by which God overcomes evil, forgives the repentant, lifts up the downtrodden, and moves the world towards wholeness.

An example of this scriptural way of describing God's rectifying justice is clear in the first chapter of Isaiah. The chapter includes denunciations of a litany of sins committed by the people of Judah, including various forms of idolatry (29) and the exploitation of widows and the fatherless (16-17, 21-23). The wrath of God is threatened against such evils, and this wrath is described as a purifying fire that will purge the community of its destructive elements: "I will turn my hand against you and will smelt away your dross as with lye and remove all your alloy Afterward you shall be called the city of righteousness, the faithful city" (25-26). The judgment of God here leads to a community of righteousness and faithfulness. But judgment is not God's only response to Judah's sin. God offers the people a choice between persistence in evil, which will lead to judgment, and repentance, which will lead to forgiveness: "'Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool. If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land; but if you refuse and

rebel, you shall be eaten by the sword” (18-20). One way or another, God will cleanse the community of its evil and restore it to a state of flourishing. However, it will make rather a large difference to the individuals involved if evil is purged by judgment (in which God treats them as they deserve) or by forgiveness (in which God responds to their repentance by treating them better than they deserve). Whether individual members of the community will experience God’s judgment or forgiveness depends upon their response to God’s prophetic word through Isaiah.

The question arises, should these two actions of God—judgment and forgiveness—be thought of as justice and the suspension of justice? This is to say: Is a gracious response to evil the opposite of justice (because it does not allocate the judgment that is due), or is it a manifestation of God’s rectifying justice? The answer becomes clear in verses 27-28: “Zion shall be redeemed by justice [*mishpat*], and those in her who repent, by righteousness [*tsedaquah*]. But rebels and sinners shall be broken together, and those who forsake the Lord shall be consumed.” In this text, God’s justice is not that *from which* sinners are saved; it is that *by which* sinners are saved. The righteousness and justice of God in this text are God’s commitment to work faithfully towards the restoration of *shalom* in the covenant community. This commitment can be expressed in judgment and wrath towards “rebels and sinners” who refuse to heed the merciful invitation to repent contained in the prophetic word. However, God’s gracious forgiveness of those who repent—God’s decision not to allocate their due, but something far better than what they have merited—is an expression of justice, not a suspension of justice.⁵¹

⁵¹ In scripture, God’s gracious justice reveals sin, calls people to repent, enables this repentance, and then forgives the repentant sinner. On Isaiah 1:27, J. Alec Motyer writes: “There are two sides to restoration:

Nor is the passage from Isaiah an isolated text. Later in Isaiah, a blistering denunciation of Judah's sins and warning of divine wrath is followed by the statement: "Therefore the Lord waits to be gracious to you, and therefore he exalts himself to show mercy to you. For the Lord is a God of justice; blessed are all those who wait for him" (Isa. 30:18). Just as God's justice is manifest in his judgment of evil, so it will be manifest in his grace and mercy upon those who humbly depend upon him. Switching to the New Testament, the first epistle of John contains a text that even more clearly declares God's justice and faithfulness to be the grounds that guarantee he will forgive repentant sinners: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). Texts such as these are diametrically opposed to any concept of justice that precludes mercy and forgiveness for the repentant or binds those in power to subject offenders to the maximum punishment for their offences. On the contrary, God's grace towards the repentant is an expression of divine justice. Once this is recognized, certain biblical patterns of thought begin making more sense. For example, Psalm 99:4 declares of God: "The King in his might loves justice [*mishpat*], You have established equity [*meysnar*]; you have executed justice [*mishpat*] and righteousness [*tsedaquah*] in Jacob." Here, the familiar triad of words from Proverbs 1:3 appears—righteousness, justice, and equity. In this text they are descriptors of the character and acts of the divine King. The Psalm proceeds to describe the manifestation of God's justice and power as displayed in God's dealing with his people and to call on God's people to worship their King for his

objectively, the Lord's work of redemption and subjectively, the human response of penitence. The adverbial phrases *with justice* and *with righteousness* (verse 21) govern both aspects. When he redeems, the Lord does not overlook but satisfies the claims of his holy precepts" (51). In chapter 4 of this dissertation, I reflect at length upon the connections between forgiveness, justice, and repentance.

character and acts. In verse 8, the psalm proclaims of the exodus generation: “O Lord our God, you answered them, you were a forgiving God to them, but an avenger of their wrongdoing.” The righteousness, justice, and equity of the divine King are manifest in his hearing prayers, forgiving the repentant, and condemning those who persist in evil. God’s kingdom of justice overcomes evil and restores *shalom* by breaking into the world with both judgment and grace.

That grace is an expression of justice rather than a suspension of justice is clear, also, in its association with generosity.⁵² Scripture frequently calls upon those who presently enjoy material prosperity to give abundantly to those who are in material need, and this invitation to generosity comes under the rubric not only of love, but also of justice. For example, Psalm 112 pronounces God’s blessing upon the generous in these terms: “Even in darkness light dawns for the upright, for those who are gracious and compassionate and righteous [*tsadeek*]. Good will come to those who are generous and lend freely, who conduct their affairs with justice [*mishpat*]” (4-5). The qualities of justice and righteousness are explicitly connected with graciousness and compassion, and all of these are expressed with generosity to those in need. But this generosity is clearly more than “allocating to each his due.” If our only framework for thinking about justice is treating individuals in the manner that they have merited, then generosity is foreign to justice. To say this another way, the classical Western conception of justice can obligate a person to make payments that are due, but it cannot move a person to give generously to someone who has no right to demand payment. However, the

⁵² For helpful contemporary reflections on the relationship between justice and generosity, see Ron J. Sider, *Just Generosity: A New Vision for Overcoming Poverty in America*, and Tim Keller, *Generous Justice: How God’s Grace Makes Us Just*.

biblical conception of justice is an active, creative orientation of life, which moves people to pursue communal wholeness even where rights and duties do not enter the equation. Such impulses of the just person are inherently gracious, moving beyond questions of what is due to whom.

I have been attending to particular texts, but it is also worthwhile to step back and observe how the themes I have been developing run throughout the wider biblical narrative. The story of Genesis is the story of God creating the world and cultivating a dwelling place of peace for humanity, followed by humanity's tragic rebellion against God, the disintegration of *shalom* that follows this rebellion, and God's acts of judgment and grace in response to human evil. The covenant of grace that God makes with the seed of Abraham is for the purpose of blessing to all the nations of the earth, and—by implication—reversing the disintegrating effects of sin and restoring *shalom*. This becomes clear in Genesis 18:18, in which God declares that Abraham will “become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him,” and the manner in which this will take place is made clear in the following verse: “For I have chosen him, that he may command his children and his household after him keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice, so that the Lord may bring to Abraham what he has promised him” (18:19). It is by learning to trust God's grace and walking down God's path of righteousness and justice that the covenantal family will bring blessing to the earth. But the plausibility of this plan is immediately drawn into question by the ongoing wickedness of Abraham's family. In particular, the fratricidal strife of Cain and Able—which was among the first manifestations of the *shalom*-destroying effects of sin—is recapitulated again and again by the brotherly

conflict between Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Essau, and Joseph and his brothers. However, in the fourth generation of the covenant family, Joseph emerges as a figure who has finally learned to walk with God in the way of righteousness and justice. These qualities of his character are manifest not in the severity by which he punishes evildoers, but precisely by his gracious willingness to restore peace in the covenant family by forgiving the brother who sold him into slavery (Gen. 45:1-28; 50:15-21).

When the covenantal family is enslaved, God executes justice by judging the oppressive powers of Egypt and showing grace to the oppressed people of Israel. The scriptures emphasize that God's saving act of delivering Israel from the Egyptians was not based upon their merits—for they were themselves a sinful people—but a manifestation of grace (Deut. 7:7-8; Num. 14:19). God's gracious justice towards Israel becomes the basis for the lifestyle that God requires of his people, as described in the law of Moses. Consider for example, Leviticus 19, in which God repeatedly calls his people to imitate his character as it has been revealed in his saving acts. The laws enjoined here call for interpersonal relations and social structures that are alike marked by consideration for the poor, the disabled, and the immigrant (9-10, 13-14). With a realistic accommodation for human sinfulness, the text enjoins equitable courts that hold wrongdoers accountable for their actions: "You shall do no injustice in court You shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great, but in righteousness shall you judge your neighbor" (15). Passing judgment on those who perpetrate evil, whatever their economic status, is part of what it means for a community to be shaped by the gracious justice of God, and yet three verses later we find that forgiveness is also to characterize this society. The famous command to "love your neighbor as yourself" is the second

half of a sentence in which God forbids the people to “take vengeance or bear a grudge” (18). Lest the people should wrongly conclude that these standards of justice, mercy, and love apply only to fellow Israelites, the text proceeds to declare, “When a stranger who sojourns with you in your land, you shall do him no wrong. You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God” (33-34). Judgment, mercy, and love towards Israelites and immigrants alike are to characterize the community that is formed by God’s saving acts.

These themes continue throughout the rest of the Old Testament. Its narrative books consist largely of describing God’s judgment and grace upon a people that falls short of the standards of righteousness and justice to which it has been called. As I have shown above, the wisdom literature reasserts that the path of righteousness, justice, and equity set forth in the Mosaic law is the only path that leads to true human flourishing. The prophets of Israel are filled with scathing denunciations of the failure of God’s people to live according to such standards: “The people of the land have practiced extortion and committed robbery. They have oppressed the poor and needy, and have extorted from the sojourner without justice” (Ezekiel 22:29). “So the law is paralyzed, and justice never goes forth. For the wicked surround the righteous; so justice goes forth perverted” (Hab. 1:4). The ire of the prophets is most profound when directed against the religious hypocrisy of those who perpetrate injustice and then seek to placate God by their acts of piety. In a powerful Isaianic passage, God mocks such piety of those who “seek me daily and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that did righteousness and did not forsake the judgment of their God” (Isa. 58:2). As the passage

continues, God rejects the false fasting wherein people abstain from food and cover themselves with sackcloth but fail to address the suffering of the oppressed. With this vain religiosity God contrasts the true fasting with which he would be pleased: “Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?” (58:6-7). In the remainder of the chapter, God promises that repentance, in this form of doing justice for the oppressed, would result in an outpouring of divine grace. Indeed, the prophets are full of pronouncements that God’s reign of justice is coming to restore *shalom* on earth, and this kingdom will bring forgiveness for the repentant and judgment for those who persist in rebellion.

In the New Testament, Jesus is presented as the embodiment of God’s promised kingdom. He has come to “bring justice to victory” (Matt. 12:21), and his kingdom comes with judgment and grace. In the stark words of John the Baptist: “His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire” (Matt. 3:12). As in the message of Israel’s prophets, what determines whether God’s kingdom of justice will be experienced as judgment or grace depends on repentance or the lack thereof. However, Jesus speaks of God’s kingdom not as a future event but a present reality: “Jesus began to preach, saying, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand’” (Matt. 4:12). Elsewhere, Jesus describes his whole ministry as calling “sinners to repentance” (Lk. 5:32). The miracles of Jesus reveal the nature of God’s kingdom by graciously reversing

the curse of sin and restoring *shalom* on earth: the sick are healed, the dead are raised, evil powers are driven out, water is turned into wine, bread is multiplied, chaotic seas are subdued, and the peace of God is manifest in the world. He also teaches his disciples to hear and heed the radical call to love, justice, mercy, and faithfulness that is contained in the Law and Prophets of the Old Testament (Matt. 5-7; 22:34-40; 23:23). However, all four gospels make it clear that Jesus' miracles and teachings are only a small part of his ministry to establish God's kingdom of peace. He will bring justice to victory not by the power or miracles or the wisdom of his words, but by the self-giving love displayed on the cross. It is here that Jesus' "blood of the covenant . . . is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matt. 26:28). In a manner greater than Joseph, Jesus embodied the righteousness and justice of God precisely by surrendering his own rights so that his enemies might be forgiven.

In the next chapter, I consider in more detail how the biblical themes of justice, grace, judgment, forgiveness, and love converge at the crucifixion of Jesus, but the point at present is that—throughout the scriptures—God's "rectifying justice," by which he restores peace on earth, is manifest in both judgment and grace. Thus, to reduce "doing justice" to enacting retribution would be a terrible reduction. Nor is it adequate to conceive of justice as allocating deserved rewards and punishments. On the contrary, forgiveness and generosity—both of which consist of treating people better than they have a right to demand—are central to the justice that God displays towards humans and requires of humans. To put this another way, when we read the assertion of St. James that "mercy triumphs over judgment" (Ja. 2:13), we should not conclude that a law of love has superseded a law of justice. Rather, we should conclude that judgment

and wrath are but the lesser deeds of justice. The greater glory of divine and human justice is not in overcoming evil by punishing evildoers, but by redeeming them. Only mercy and grace have this power for redemption, which is the ultimate triumph of justice.

One of the greatest practical challenges associated with doing justice in a way that is shaped by Christian scripture has to do with discerning how judgment/punishment interacts with grace/mercy in everyday life. Many biblical texts clearly require those in positions of social power to hold wrongdoers accountable for their actions so that the innocent are no longer exploited. Proverbs warns: “He who justifies the wicked and he who condemns the righteous are both alike an abomination to the Lord” (Prov. 17:15). The reason why God disapproves of the one “who justifies the wicked” is made more clear in Isaiah 5:23, where the prophet pronounces woes upon all “who acquit the guilty for a bribe,” for by so doing they “deprive the innocent of his right [*tsedaqah*].” If those in a position of social power fail to punish the wicked, they are perpetuating the exploitation of the innocent. Scripture is clear that not only individual rulers, but also the laws of the land, are capable of thus perverting justice, protecting oppressors, and leaving the innocent vulnerable. Again, Isaiah pronounces the judgment of God upon such laws and those who make them: “Woe to those who make unjust laws, to those who issue oppressive decrees, to deprive the poor of their rights and withhold justice from the oppressed of my people, making widows their prey and robbing the fatherless” (10:1-2). Rather than serving the interests of those who would maintain their privilege and power at the expense of the vulnerable, God requires laws, law-makers, and all forms of civil authority to punish oppressors so that the

innocent may thrive. In this spirit, Paul writes in Romans 13 that “governing authorities” have been “instituted by God” (1) and granted “the sword” (4)—a symbol of coercive power—for the purpose of enacting “God’s wrath on the wrongdoer” for the “good” of the community as a whole (4). This power is not autonomous and does not exist for its own sake; rather, those who wield it are servants of God (Rom. 13:4), accountable to the higher authority of the divine King. On one hand, this means that any civil power wielded in opposition to God’s revealed justice must not be obeyed, which is why Martin Luther King, Jr. was justified in practicing civil disobedience with regard to dehumanizing segregationist laws (Isa, 10:1-2; Ac. 4:19-20). On the other hand, the coercive power of civil authority to punish evil exists for the purpose of restraining human wickedness for the common good, which is why Martin Luther King, Jr. was also justified in his repeated appeals to the federal government to send the National Guard to defend peaceful protestors. Clearly, the scriptures uphold the legitimacy of coercive power wielded in a way that holds evildoers accountable for their deeds, and this is an important aspect of justice.⁵³

However, it is equally important to note that grace, forgiveness, and generosity are also aspects of justice, which—in its basic scriptural meaning—consists not of doling out proportionate rewards and punishments, but of righting wrongs and restoring *shalom*. This is made clear in the example of the divine King, whose justice is manifest in not only the punishment of the wicked but also the forgiveness of the repentant. Because he is “faithful and just,” God does not fail to forgive those who turn from evil (1 Jn. 1:9). As I have shown, this principle is also manifest in the righteousness and justice of Joseph, who uses his social power not to condemn his enemies but to forgive

⁵³ Chapter 4 of this dissertation includes a more detailed analysis of Romans 13:1-6.

them. In the next chapter, I consider more carefully the meaning of forgiveness, its relationship to justice, and the vexed question of how interpersonal forgiveness relates to political and legal concepts such as amnesty. At present, however, my point is that biblical justice cannot be reduced to treating individuals in the way that their actions have merited; it is about pursuing communal wellbeing, sometimes by judging the wicked, and often by demonstrating the grace and generosity that treats people better than they deserve.

At this point, I am in a position to take up the vexed issue of retribution. As Christopher Marshall rightly notes, the difficulty of relating biblical ethics to the philosophical tradition of thinking about retributive justice begins with the fact that “the concept itself is dogged with ambiguity and imprecision” (“Retributive” 440) The word’s etymological meaning, “repayment,” denotes rendering what is deserved, whether reward or punishment. However, it is most frequently used in a way that strongly connotes the negative meaning of punishment, and it often evokes ideas of revenge or vindictiveness. In penal philosophy, retributive justice is often associated with the concepts of “guilt” (meaning free moral agents have made a culpable decision to do wrong) and “desert” (meaning that punishment is the fitting, and perhaps obligatory, response of justice to this culpable wrongdoing). Closely associated ideas include “proportionality,” which means that the punishment should fit the crime, and “censure,” which means that punishment testifies to the restraints a society’s laws place upon evil while simultaneously rectifying moral imbalance and dissuading further infraction (Marshall, “Retributive” 440). There are certain resonances between this tradition of retributive justice and the themes of biblical texts like Romans 13:1-6;

however, I note that much contemporary discourse about justice views the concept almost exclusively through the lens of retribution, which results in serious distortions of the biblical picture.

A more nuanced evaluation of retributive justice from the standpoint of Christian theology is needed. On the positive side, the retributive tradition rightly upholds both that evil deeds are morally culpable in a way that deserves judgment and that punishments must never exceed a proportional response to morally culpable action. However, Marshall is again perceptive in his observation that “moral guilt may be an essential prerequisite for justified punishment, but it is rarely a sufficient justification, since society deems it neither expedient nor morally imperative to punish every moral infraction.” Even more important than this apt observation that human societies invariably find it expedient not to impose penalties on any number of moral lapses is the fact that scripture teaches forgiving the repentant is an expression of God’s justice and then calls on humans to similarly display this forgiveness. Indeed, the idea that “mercy triumphs over judgment” positively flies in the face of the notion that proportionally penalizing all wrongdoing is morally incumbent. Moreover, the claim that only by punishing evil deeds can moral order be established is incompatible with the teaching of scripture and the practice of almost all human societies that confession, repentance, and restitution accomplish the same end (Marshall). In addition, if retribution is the primary or exclusive lens through which one thinks about justice, the biblical injunction to actively, sacrificially, and generously pursue *shalom* by doing good for the vulnerable members of society is lost. In sum, the tradition of retributive justice helpfully emphasizes that judgment upon evil deeds is morally justified and that punishments

must never exceed the moral infraction that they seek to censure, but the retributive framework also has serious limitations from a Christian perspective.

The recently developed paradigms of “restorative justice” and “just peacemaking” are much more effective in applying the full range of scriptural teaching to situations of conflict and wrongdoing within and between human societies. These models uphold the necessity of censuring wrongdoing and calling evildoers to account, and—despite the fact that some advocates of just peacemaking are pacifists—neither of these traditions denies the validity of using coercive power to restrain injustice and hold wrongdoers to account. However, both of these ways of thinking about justice emphasize the goal of restoring wellbeing at a communal level. They also both make a place for concepts such as restitution, reconciliation, and forgiveness that area virtually absent from the dominant modes of jurisprudence in the contemporary West. Moreover, the practices of public truth-telling and listening, which leads towards a communal process of determining what justice requires, uphold the important biblical emphasis upon hearing and heeding the cries of the oppressed. As I emphasized in my discussion of the discipline of prophetic imagination, it is only through such a process of listening and communal dialogue that redemptive ways forward are likely to be discerned, and the monopolization of “justice” by the powerful is likely to be overcome. In all of these ways, the restorative justice and just peacemaking traditions are very welcome developments. However, their most significant limitation is that they still tend to emphasize justice as a creative response to wrongdoing and conflict. In other words, doing justice is still largely thought of in reactive rather than proactive terms. More

effort needs to be applied to thinking about justice as a positive, initiative-taking commitment to developing flourishing communities, a task which I take up in chapter 4.

To conclude, the relationship between primary and rectifying justice that I have developed in this chapter is something very different than the “justice” that has been subjected to well-deserved criticisms by Christian and secular thinkers alike. If justice could indeed be reduced to allocating individual rewards and punishments where they are due, then a Christian ethic of “unmotivated” love would, as Anders Nygren argues, necessarily supersede the narrow ethics of mainstream justice. Likewise, if justice only means that modern nation states must give their citizens the rights that they demand, then Hauerwas is right to argue that an ethic based on this notion of justice would be “a bad idea for Christians.” Likewise, if justice must necessarily signify the social arrangements established by the powerful to protect their power, then Marx and Nietzsche would be quite right to have little use for the term. However, the biblical notion of justice is something more and other than all of these justices. It is God’s purposes of bringing creation to a state of *shalom* in which every creature can flourish, and it is at work in the people of God when they commit themselves to this same vision of human flourishing. The just community dreams of a peaceable kingdom that is borne witness in the scriptures, attends to the cries of those members of society who are most vulnerable to suffering and exploitation, and then works creatively to make these dreams reality. This creative work is not limited by the calculus of relative merits; rather, it graciously works for the common good in a spirit of generosity and compassion. In a world in which willful human evil persists, those members of the just, believing community who possess social power must be willing to use it—coercively if

necessary—to restrain wickedness and protect the innocent. However, the experience of divine grace has alerted this community to a redemptive power of mercy and forgiveness to cultivate *shalom* in a manner that judgment never could. Such powerful works of mercy are often slow, and they generally require self-sacrifice. But, compelled by love to build a beloved community, the church tirelessly bears witness to the presence of Christ’s kingdom by pursuing a world in which all of God’s image-bearers can thrive. This is what it means to do justice.

3.9. Walking el Camino de Justicia

My participation in *El Camino del Inmigrante*—a prayer walk from Tijuana to Los Angeles that took place in August of 2016—was the result of many years living among immigrants whom I watched suffer due to our nation’s broken immigration system. I was slow—inexcusably slow—to join the work of changing this system, which continues to cause so much harm to so many of my innocent neighbors. But around March of 2016, the accumulation of painful memories was becoming too substantial for me to ignore. I was especially haunted by memories of my friends José and Marco.

About a decade earlier, José had first knocked on my door to tell me about his spiritual conversion. He had previously been involved in gang and drug culture, but he’d had a rather dramatic experience at the home of his mother’s Pentecostal pastor, and he assured me that he was a new man. Now he wanted me to be his mentor. I tried to encourage José, but I also warned him that he’d better decide how serious he was about this new life direction. I had heard plenty of stories about powerful spiritual

experience before, and most of them didn't seem to stick. It would take time and hard work to build a new life. Jose gave me a look suggesting that I didn't understand just how real his experience had been, but he also agreed that he would do the necessary work to grow. He came around my house to study the Bible for a few weeks, and then he fell off the map again.

Several months later, however, he reappeared, and this time things really were different. "Now I understand what you told me before," José said. "I got back on drugs, just like you warned me. But now I'm clean, and I'm ready to work at changing. Will you teach me?" I agreed, and José quickly became one of the most inspiring and dedicated young Christians I've ever had the privilege to know.

Like many undocumented immigrants, José worked day-labor jobs that began early, but he took me to breakfast at Denny's Restaurant before dawn once a week in order to talk about life and faith. He always insisted on paying for breakfast, and every time I challenged him to make some tangible change in his life, he always did more than I had asked. On one occasion, I walked into his bedroom to discover that spiritual illustrations I had scribbled on napkins at our weekly breakfast meetings were carefully arranged on his dresser so that he could meditate on them regularly. José's life and character were quickly transforming. He became known as a person who prayed with fervor and shared his faith with other young men in the community. He started asking questions about how he could spend his life making a positive difference in the lives of others. He had tremendous potential to become a strong indigenous leader in a neighborhood that badly needed such leaders.

But José also faced tremendous challenges due to his immigration status. Like so many from his generation, his parents had brought him across the southern border from Mexico when he was a young child. They were fleeing a situation of poverty and violence in pursuit of a better future for their children. José had been carried across the U.S. border without his volition as a small child, but years later he was still suffering the consequences of a system that provided him no legal protections. He had no home to return to in Mexico, but in the United States he was easily exploited. Many times he would tell me stories about being mistreated or taken advantage of at work. Like most undocumented people in this situation, he could not demand fair treatment or fair pay for fear of deportation. Moreover, he had a young daughter from a dating relationship prior to his conversion, but the mother's white family held deep prejudice against "Mexicans" and would not allow him to see his child. Because he was undocumented, he did not have legal recourse to secure his parental rights. Despite his serious efforts at personal and spiritual growth, José found himself in a downward spiral of poverty, alienation, and discouragement. In order to make ends meet, he began mowing lawns with a group of old friends, and—through a series of circumstances I will not describe here—he was tragically shot and killed while spending time with these friends.

Six years after meeting José, I became friends with a fourteen-year-old young man named Marco who was a U.S. citizen of Mexican descent living in one of the most violent and drug-infested apartment complexes in Oklahoma City. Marco's older brother had recently been sentenced to life in prison, and Marco was walking down a path that led in a similar direction. But he was also searching for a more hopeful future. He began attending a Bible study in his apartment complex, and the story of Jesus had a

transforming impact upon him. Within a few months, his life was dramatically changed, and his parents took note. Before long, they were inviting me to come teach the scriptures in their home on a weekly basis, and several of their neighbors and family members began attending as well. A former drug dealer, Marco was becoming a peacemaker and racial-reconciler in his community. Before long, he was trying to decide if he wanted to become a doctor or a pastor in order to help build a better future for our neighborhood.

However, about a year after Marco's transformation began, his mother suddenly died of natural causes. At this time, I learned that his father was undocumented. Their family had been subsisting on a combination of his mother's Social Security Disability check and the sporadic income his father was able to earn as a maintenance worker in a few low-income apartment complexes. After his mother's death, Marco and his father were forced to move into an over-crowded home with his sister and several other family members in an effort to make things work financially. His father was skilled and constantly looking for work, but job security and the guarantee of fair remuneration are luxuries that undocumented immigrants do not enjoy. The financial burden proved too much. Marco eventually had to move to Texas in order to live with some of his mother's extended family. I still have great hope for his future, but due to his father's undocumented status, Marco has already suffered separation from his closest family and his church community. The tragic reality is that he has an uphill road ahead of him.

Through my relationships with people like José and Marco, I have learned that pastoral care and community development are not adequate to help people reach their God-given potential if their life is being choked out by a system of laws and social

structures that treats them unfairly. Moreover, the pain of individuals like José and Marco also has broader implications for the community in which they live. In my low-income, high-crime neighborhood, nothing is needed more than strong, indigenous leaders who emerge from the community and commit themselves to building a brighter future for their own neighborhoods. Our church has seen black, white, and Native American Christians grow into this kind of leader. Instead of leaving the neighborhood to search for better opportunities, these remarkable people are staying to mentor kids, teach in our schools, serve on the Board of Directors for local non-profit organizations, and provide positive role models for the next generation. But, time-and-again, I have watched Latino youth and young adults who are hungry to grow, learn, and serve face huge obstacles due to an immigration situation that was no fault of their own. Neither José nor Marco had made any personal decision to violate U.S. immigration law, but our system caused them to suffer nonetheless. When inner-city youth cannot realize their full potential due to a system that punishes them for their parents' decision to flee violence and poverty, we have an unacceptable situation that perpetuates our biggest social problems. If we want our cities to flourish, we need laws that do not place unjust restraints upon many of our brightest and best young people.

In March of 2016, I was becoming increasingly convinced that mentoring and spiritual care were inadequate responses to the situation faced by my neighbors like José and Marco. These neighbors needed me to do something about the system that was limiting their opportunities to thrive. Around this time, I visited the website of the Christian Community Development Association (CCDA), a network of Christians and churches committed to holistic ministry in under-resourced communities. CCDA's

president, Noel Castellanos, had recently spent a sabbatical walking the famous Camino del Santiago pilgrimage in Spain, and the website now included an open letter in which Noel described his conviction that God was prompting him to organize another pilgrimage, but this one would be a walk in solidarity with migrants who are suffering across the world. The event—El Camino del Inmigrante—would highlight the stories of real immigrants and refugees in an effort to combat the rise of xenophobic impulses in the political climate of the United States. Four months later, I was on a plane with another member of my congregation to join Christians from across the nation in this walk from Tijuana to Los Angeles.

El Camino was a highly effective advocacy strategy that drew significant media attention, but—for me—the most significant and unexpected part of the experience was the personal impact it had on me. On the first night of the walk, in St. Stephens Church of God in Christ, Rev. George McKinney helped me to connect the dots between this pilgrimage and the theological convictions of the Civil Rights movement, in which I had been immersed for many years. This was about justice rolling down. It was about the long, slow, hard work of cultivating beloved community. But it was on the second night of the event that things started to break loose in my own soul.

That night, a long-time advocate for migrant agricultural workers came to speak to us. She began her talk with the famous “Prayer of the Farm Workers’ Struggle,” written by Caesar Chavez. The first petition of this prayer is “Show me the suffering of the most miserable, so that I may know my people’s plight.” While our speaker continued her talk, this petition kept bouncing around in my head. I had seen the pain of my immigrant friends and neighbors. I’d even suffered the secondary trauma of

watching them hurt. And yet, somehow, I felt that I hadn't really learned what it meant to enter this pain, to "know my people's plight." The petition started making connections in my head with various Pauline phrases: "Weep with those who weep" (Rom. 12:15). "Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ" (Gal. 6:2). Jesus didn't just see the suffering of humanity and feel empathy; he entered into that pain redemptively.

While these thoughts were circulating in my head, I happened to be sitting near a nurse's station, where a volunteer from a nearby Catholic church was helping walkers with their blisters. The woman currently being treated at the nurse's station was Irene Finnigan, who, when she was nine-years-old, had escaped with her mother from a repatriation camp outside of Prague during World War II. When they escaped, Irene's sister had already been killed, and now she and her mother had hundreds of miles to walk—stealing food, hiding from people in uniforms—driven by the will to survive. The pain of these events was so difficult that Irene's mother told her that they must forget what had happened. For seven decades, Irene did her best to heed this advice, but then she heard from her nextdoor neighbor about a group of people walking El Camino del Inmigrante, and she decided it was time to break her silence.

She did so in a very public way. On the national website of CCDA, she posted a blog describing why she decided to walk El Camino. With the eloquence of a woman who spent many years teaching Russian literature, Irene's post describes her own experience of illegal migration with her mother in the 1940s:

We crawled under barbed wire fences, walked through forests by night, avoided police dogs, and hid in barns by day. We waded through a frozen river on the Czech border into Germany. I learned to fear the uniform. It made humans powerful and cruel. I also learned that the origin and allegiance of that uniform

made no difference. The uniform gave strength, power and capability to a human to be either magnanimous and heroically kind, or extremely cruel, depending on the circumstances.

After telling her own story of migration, Irene's post proceeds to make connections between her experience and the experiences of those affected by the current global migration crisis:

the news in the past year has once again told of children and parents walking surreptitiously through European forests by night, in desperate search for safety. People from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere are seeking refuge, but too often are being met with scorn. Central American children and their mothers make a similar journey to my own adopted homeland, yearning for freedom—but many who taste it are deported back to the violence they had fled. Others walk north searching simply for food, fleeing poverty. The news of these immigrant and refugee stories, continuously remind me of my own story.

For Irene, El Camino became a way of remembering her life's journey and of expressing her common humanity with those who currently share the same struggles that she endured. "Immigrants are deeply imbedded in my heart," she writes, "they are all my brothers and sisters, my relatives. I am related to them all." And now, the woman to whom these words belong was sitting a few feet from me, receiving first aid for her sore feet.

Nothing could be clearer to me than the fact that Irene Finnigan did not owe the world any more suffering. Her life had been marked by unthinkable pain from childhood, and yet she somehow managed to overcome, to live with dignity, compassion, and joy. Nonetheless, here she was with blistered feet, on a journey of pain that was also a journey of love and hope. She saw the suffering of people displaced by the world's brokenness and injustice, and she found a way to join these people as a sister, to walk with them in the path of justice, *el camino de justicia*. In a strange way, Irene's feet seemed to be the answer to a host of questions in my mind. What does it

mean to really see the suffering of the most miserable, to know my people's plight? What does it mean to bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ? That night, I wept for the loss of my friend José for the first time. By walking with Irene—with José and Marco and all my suffering family—I was learning a silent, embodied language of lament. In the following days, walking itself became a form of prayer, which was allowing my long-buried anger to pass into the realm of grief, from whence it could emerge cleansed, transmuted into the creative power of love.

As I flew back from California to Oklahoma City, it became clear that the form of prayer I had been learning could not remain silent for long. The scripture now churning about in my soul was Proverbs 31:8-9: "Open your mouth for the mute, for the rights of all who are destitute. Open your mouth, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy." The broken immigration system of the United States has rendered my undocumented neighbors virtually voiceless. They cannot vote, nor can they easily access policy makers. But there are places where I have access that they do not. I was belatedly taking my first steps down a path that I knew would involve speaking truth to power. At the time, the presidential candidacy of Donald Trump still seemed like a bad joke to me, but anti-immigrant political discourse was on the rise. During the coming months, it became clear that the hardliners of the far right were much more prominent than I had expected, and that a disturbingly large number of Christian leaders in the United States were willing to put up with crude, xenophobic nationalism as long as it did not interfere with their commitments to a prolife stance and a form of "religious liberty" that seemed to signify "protecting the power of conservative Christians that we feel is threatened by Muslims and LGBTQ activists."

On November 9, 2016, it became clear that the election of President Trump would mean—among other things—a bitter fight to hold back the most devastating policies on the table while contending for the soul of American Christianity, which was obviously infected by a toxic form of religious nationalism.

Meanwhile, a diverse group of fourteen key leaders in my congregation, Christ Community Church, had begun meeting in September to study scriptures about how to treat immigrants and refugees, listen to the stories of undocumented immigrants in our congregation, and learn more about the history and current status of U.S. immigration policy. These conversations were more difficult than I had anticipated. Resistance to facing the situation did not come only from the middle class, white portion of our church. Three African American men in the group shared honestly the questions that were in their own minds: “Where were the Latino activists during the Civil Rights era? What about ongoing prejudice towards blacks within the Hispanic community? Why should I give time to the issue of immigration while *my own people* are getting shot by police?” A Native American man in the group offered his simple and painful lament: “This whole conversation has me thinking that maybe I need to accept that we’ll never get around to dealing with the issues that affect *my people*.” A Latina woman who is a third-generation immigrant from Mexico tearfully confessed: “I’ve just felt so distant from the struggles of first generation immigrants. I don’t speak Spanish, so I don’t think they see me as one of them. I’m just now starting to see those who are affected as *my people*.” Through many conversations and much prayer, the group returned again to the statement of Ephesians 2 that God has created in Christ a new humanity, tearing down the dividing walls of hostility, and making peace by the blood of the cross. We were all

learning to redefine what we meant by “my people,” and this required seeing the struggle of undocumented immigrants as our own.

After a couple of months, the prayers and discussion of this little group started turning into actions. Three women from the group organized a larger church event in which fifty-or-so people gathered to pray, listen to the stories of immigrants, and learn more about our immigration crisis. Many people who attended this event began actively engaging elected officials about the plight of immigrants in our community. Then we went wider. On January 22, a coalition of eight churches and Christian organizations in our community managed to gather just over three hundred people for an event called “Who Is My Neighbor?” Black, white, and Latino pastors shared from the scriptures and their personal experiences. A couple of undocumented immigrants shared about being brought across the border by their parents as children and then learning as teenagers that they were not U.S. citizens. An advocacy expert from the Evangelical Immigration Table visited town to talk about the current state of U.S. policy and the best strategies for moving forward. The event stirred up some energy in the local Christian community and began garnering more public attention.

In the following days, national policy makers and news correspondents started reaching out to me to discuss the intersection of faith and immigration justice, as did pastors of various local congregations. In these conversations, the most frequent barrier to overcome has been a deficient conception of justice. For many, the moral calculus of this situation is simple: “Illegal aliens” have broken the law, and justice requires allocating to such “criminals” their due punishment; therefore, the only just solution is mass deportation. The language of “justice” here is exactly what Nietzsche and Marx

describe: empty moral rhetoric applied by those in positions of relative privilege as a way of justifying the imposition of their will upon millions of vulnerable people. In conversations with people who think this way, I often begin by telling stories of the undocumented immigrants whom I know. When confronted with such stories, they cannot deny that some of these people—the millions who were brought across the border as children, for example—are in no way morally culpable for their unlawful presence here. But then, they often ask: “What about their parents and all the other people who knowingly sneak across the border?” I respond to such questions I raising questions of my own: If you were unable to feed your family or educate your children, and the only way to achieve any prospect of thriving for those you love was to migrant to an incredibly wealthy country next door, but this country refused to grant visas in keeping with its own demand for migrant labor, what would you do?

In some cases, the response of my interlocutors is: “I see what you mean. This is very sad. But I think in that situation, if I was deported, I would understand that this is what justice demands.” To which I then reply: Does justice *really* demand that we treat poor, vulnerable people in the harshest way that we can in the name of the law? Does it require that we break up families and devastate the lives of people who have simply been trying to survive, people who would gladly live as law-abiding citizens if we provided them the opportunity to do so? Wouldn't it be more just to amend our laws so that they can be upheld in a way that honors the dignity of all people and gives vulnerable, hard working members of our community a fair chance to thrive? Through such conversations—in public and behind closed doors—I have seen many minds change on this pressing issue.

Meanwhile, the coalition of Oklahoma City churches working on immigration reform planned a local version of El Camino del Inmigrante. We shared invitations widely through our congregations and through traditional and social media outlets. Then, on March 4, 2017, about 500 people gathered at Santa Fe South Elementary School to walk six miles in solidarity with immigrants and refugees. These walkers came from about 25 churches, representing roughly a dozen Christian denominations, and they were joined by Muslims and secularists who shared their belief that this was a human cause transcending religious boundaries. During opening and closing rallies, walkers heard stories from immigrants and refugees as well as prayers and devotionals from an ethnically and denominationally diverse array of local clergy. Then, on the walk itself, they carried crosses, and paused to pray at designated stations.

Each of the prayer stations along the way was designed to confront injustice and stir the community toward repentance and creative action. For example, outside of Capitol Hill High School, walkers prayed around a large sign with the following words:

La Historia del Sur: the history of the southside

Capitol Hill High School was the premier high school in its prime, but in the 1970s busing brought major changes. As racial integration finally came to OKC, the district's enrollment drastically reduced and then steadily declined from 71,000 to its current enrollment of 42,549.

Once vibrant neighborhood and thriving schools were abandoned in what historians have called the great "white flight." Today these communities are being rebuilt largely by our immigrant neighbors. We need the rest of our Christian family to join in the effort! Let us seek first to understand and to love. When we fear change, may we allow our faith to guide our response.

"Father, forgive our fears and our flight. Make us bold to accept change that is just and to stand in the face of injustice. Would You open our eyes to the plight of our immigrant and refugee neighbors? Allow us to look at the issue of immigration as a human issue, Creator God. Show us how we can join the effort to rebuild a thriving community in south Oklahoma City."

Around such signs, some pilgrims stood in quiet reflection, while others joined hands and prayed fervently together. They were lamenting, and they were dreaming of what a city marked by God's *shalom* could be.

In the weeks following the event, public conversations continued. I received emails from a senator and a local school principle, both of whom wanted to continue a dialogue about how we can change the way our city and nation treats vulnerable immigrants. Local media continued publishing stories about Christian resistance to President Trump's policies towards immigrants and refugees.⁵⁴ As the advocacy work to change public policies continued to move forward, lots of friendships and partnerships across geographic boundaries were being forged, and these relationships are already giving birth to concrete local actions. White, black, and brown Christians are finding ways to partner through local churches, schools, and nonprofits for work aimed at offsetting injustice and helping immigrants in our community to thrive. These are small steps, but it feels like we are beginning to walk down the right path.

And this is the point: For Christians, discipleship means following Jesus down a path of justice, with resilient hope that this path ultimately leads to the kingdom of God. This does not mean, however, that the journey will involve more victories than defeats. The realization of tangible, this-worldly human flourishing is the goal of all work for justice, but Christians do not pursue this work because they are assured of short-term success. They do justice because they are signs of the peaceable kingdom, seeds of *shalom* that God has sown in the world. As such, they bear witness to a new creation that is coming, a future that is already present for those who have eyes to see. This

⁵⁴ For media coverage of the local El Camino prayer pilgrimage, see Carla Hinton, "Prayer walk in Oklahoma City draws hundreds to support immigrants" and Anna Brewster, "Students Prayer Walk for Six Miles, Interceding for Immigrants and Refugees."

future is beloved community, which is why doing justice entails learning to love. To this theme I now turn.

4. Love

4.1. Love, Forgiveness, and the Quest for Peace

In 1995—one year after half a million Tutsis were murdered by Hutus in Rwanda—Desmond Tutu brought a group of leaders from the All African Conference of Churches to visit the traumatized nation. One of the locations visited by Tutu and his fellow-ministers was a church in the village of Ntarama. Many Tutsis had been slaughtered inside this church, and, a year later, the new government had still not removed the bodies. Tutu describes the stench and the sight of machetes still lodged in skulls that he encountered in Ntarama as an emotionally overpowering sign of the human potential for dehumanizing viciousness (258). In the coming days, Tutu would speak to Rwandan government officials on multiple occasions, reminding them of the long history of injustice, reprisal, and counter-reprisal that had characterized relations between the Hutus and Tutsis since colonial times. He warned that responding to the current tragedy with the harshness that rage, grief, and retributive justice seem to demand would perpetuate this cycle of suffering. The only way to break the cycle, Tutu declared, was to “go beyond retributive justice to restorative justice, to move on to forgiveness, because without it there was no future” (260). Though some Rwandans responded by stating that the atrocities their nation had experienced were unforgivable, others expressed openness to Tutu’s message because their imaginations had been stirred by South Africa’s remarkably peaceful transition from violent apartheid to democracy as well as the highly publicized proceedings of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). In subsequent years, Tutu has frequently visited settings around the world that have been torn by traumatic violence, and his message—

which, he believes, would otherwise have been summarily dismissed as naïve or unjust—has been heeded by many people who claim that South Africa’s remarkable story has awakened them to the hope that peace and reconciliation may really be able to interrupt the violent vicissitudes of history.

The radical forgiveness Desmond Tutu advocates is one manifestation of Christian love, which is the driving center of the church’s vocation to combat evil and pursue peace. In his recently published memoirs *Dream With Me: Race, Love, and the Struggle We Must Win*, the veteran pastor and Civil Rights leader John M. Perkins calls love a method of “fighting without fists” (63). The love of which Perkins speaks is not a passive acquiescence to the world’s injustices, nor is it founded on any optimistic notion that humanity’s innate goodness would come to the surface if we were all a bit more nice. On the contrary, love is a way of facing the reality of the world’s evil—genocide, rape, torture, the suffering of many perpetuated by the banal self-interest of a few—and combatting it with the only weapon capable of cutting deep enough to make a difference. This militant way of thinking about love is rooted not only in Jesus’ response to the oppressive imperial and religious politics of his day, but also in the Pauline description of Christians as those who have “put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation” (1 Thes. 5:8). For Perkins, the conviction that “love is the first, middle, and final fight” is rooted both in this biblical tradition and in many decades of experience resisting the evils of racism, economic exploitation, and systemic injustice (30). Love is what compelled him to return to the rural Mississippi community where his brother, a veteran of the U.S. army, was shot in cold blood by a

white police office in 1946.⁵⁵ Love is what drove Perkins not only to preach the gospel and mentor youth in this community, but also to organize boycotts and other forms of resistance to white power holders during the heat of the Civil Rights movement. Love sustained his efforts after he was arrested and tortured almost to death by white police officers in 1970. Love drove him to keep fighting when he was rejected or dismissed by countless white evangelicals who did not want to face the reality of their complicity in the structural inequalities of the United States. Love is the power that thousands of leaders across the United States have found so profoundly transformative in the life of Perkins, who has spearheaded a movement of grassroots peacemakers in almost every major city throughout the nation.⁵⁶

Indeed, love is the driving concept at the center of the American Civil Rights movement and a host of subsequent movements that it has inspired. U.S. Congressman John Lewis—another veteran of the Civil Rights struggle—makes this point in his book *Across that Bridge: Life Lessons and a Vision of Change*. Reflecting on his experience during the sit-in movement of 1960 and his later work with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Community (SNCC), Lewis writes:

The Civil Rights Movement, above all, was a work of love. Yet, even fifty years later, it is rare to find anyone who would use the word love to describe what we did I doubt that professors who teach the history of the movement today would say that if you boiled down our intent into one all-encompassing residual word the remaining essence would be *love*. Yet I am here to tell you that among those of us who were at the heart of the movement, who fully imbibed the discipline and philosophy of nonviolence and viewed it as a reflection of profound truth, for those of us who accepted it not simply as a tactic but as a way of authentically living our lives—our sole purpose was, in fact, love. (149, 153)

⁵⁵ I have heard Perkins narrate the events mentioned in the second half of this paragraph numerous times in a variety of settings. Most of them are also recorded in his first book, *Let Justice Roll Down*.

⁵⁶ For information about the network Perkins founded, see the website of the Christian Community Development Association: <http://ccda.org/>

To immerse oneself in the teachings of movement luminaries like John Perkins, John Lewis, Martin Luther King Jr., James Lawson, and Howard Thurman is to be steeped in a theology, spirituality, and politics shaped by a particular understanding of love.

However, my experience suggests that Lewis is quite right to suspect that many who now uphold the Civil Rights movement as a triumph of human social and political progress are out of touch with its moral center of gravity. The movement's leaders are celebrated as courageous and shrewd political activists, but their own words about what drove them are given little credence. And even though "falling in love" remains the pinnacle of existential fulfillment according to the mythologies of American popular culture, the kind of love that seeks to combat evil and transform society by sacrificially pouring oneself out for the good of others seems to have fallen out of style.

While Christians have never stopped talking about love as a central aspect of their theological and ethical vision, there is an urgent need to continue thinking about how love should guide, motivate, and shape political engagement in the twenty-first century post-Christian West. The Bible and the entire theological tradition unanimously consider love for God and neighbor the mark of true discipleship and the chief virtue of Christian life, but its significance for thinking about politics and political action has not been given adequate attention by Christian thinkers since the end of the Civil Rights era. In practice, a lot of political talk (on the Right and the Left) seems to indicate that politics is the realm of justice and power, while love is relegated to the narrower circle of interpersonal relationships. This is too simplistic. As Martin Luther King Jr. saw, love is the end, the means, and the motivation of a political praxis that is genuinely Christian. Moreover, King's life and thought demonstrate a form of public action that is

particularly suited to maximize the potential for grassroots civil engagement that moves the concept of “politics” from the realm of statecraft and institutional power structures to the realm of responsible citizens. As Taylor Branch rightly puts it: “Like America’s original Founders, those who marched for civil rights reduced power to human scale. They invested hope in the capacity of ordinary people to create bonds of citizenship based on simple ideals” (*Canaan’s Edge* 771). Among the simple ideals at the heart of the nonviolent movement, love was central. Moreover, I would add, in our highly volatile and hyper-militarized geopolitical climate—in which the world’s population is increasingly urbanized, and urban communities are characterized by pluralism of every kind—love is also the only force powerful enough to resist the community-eroding effects of evil, create a shared vision for the common good, and motivate the sacrificial action that is necessary to move towards any realization of such a vision. It is time for Christians who yearn for peace and justice to refocus their energies on understanding and embodying a publicly responsible and socially relevant praxis of love.

A few voices are sounding a similar note among secular cultural theorists of the Left. One such voice, bell hooks, has been emphasizing the need to return to a social vision with love at the center. In the late 1990s, hooks began to make this case, arguing in “Love as the Practice of Freedom” that the absence of love keeps many cultural theorists unwittingly allied to politics shaped by the “ethics of domination.” She cites theorists focused on racial justice but indifferent to inequities associated with gender and vice versa. Such intellectuals, hooks writes, fail to be a compelling force for justice because they are not guided by a vision of humanity that is liberated from all forms of domination to embody communities of love. At a deeper level, hooks also argues in this

essay that contemporary progressives are hindered by “a collective failure to acknowledge the needs of the spirit and an overdetermined emphasis on material concerns” (289). As a Christian, I find much that is positive here and in hooks’ subsequent books on love. However, her positive philosophy of love does leave a great deal to be desired. She draws heavily on a number of Christian thinkers and activists from the twentieth century—most notably Martin Luther King Jr., Howard Thurman, and Thomas Merton—but she blends their ideas with frothy works of pop psychology and manuals of new age spirituality that seem to be selected from the shelves of the self-help aisle at Barnes & Noble. Though I am no enemy of philosophical thinking that engages and synthesizes a heterogeneous range of sources, hooks’ eclecticism here occurs at the expense of depth, coherence, and conceptual rigor, which diminishes the passion and wisdom characterizing much of her recent work. Nonetheless, hooks has boldly plowed new ground in cultural studies, and I welcome the attention that she and other secular thinkers—including Alain Badiou, Srećko Horvat, Martha Nussbaum, and Luc Ferry—are giving to the concept of love and its role in contemporary cultural theory and public life. In this chapter, I aim to join this conversation by developing a distinctively Christian account of love and exploring ways in which this account can inform contextually relevant political practice.

My argument begins by surveying the types and levels of love as they have often been categorized in classic and modern works on the subject. I then consider some of the more important criticisms that have been made of Christian love with a goal of letting these criticisms refine my own account. This paves the way for several sections in which I attempt to ground my theory of love deeply in the soil of major areas of

Christian doctrine, namely the cross, the Trinity, justification, and the nature of Christian virtue. I then consider the implications of thinking about the church as a community of love, followed by an exploration of biblical and theological models for conceiving the church's relationship to political power. The final sections of this chapter articulate particular tactics of love with which the church can do justice and make peace in the twenty-first century. My central argument is that Christian love—free self-giving for the good of another, which aims at cultivating and sustaining communities of mutual care—compels the church to actively seek the good of the world while also providing distinctive, nonviolent means of doing so. I propose, further, that particular strategies of community development and nonviolent direct action—strategies that have been forged in the struggles of African American Christians for justice and freedom—provide the best starting point for thinking about the means by which contemporary churches may fulfill their peacemaking vocation.

4.2. Types and Levels of Love

In contemporary philosophy, it is common to distinguish between types of love by referring to four Greek terms that are often rendered “love” in English: *agape*, *éros*, *philia*, and *storgē*. In their *Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon*, Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott associate *agape* with the concept of “charity” and “the love of God for man and man for God,” while they connect *éros* with “sexual passion,” *philia* with “affectionate regard” or “friendship” that subsists “between equals,” and *storgē* with the affection between parents and children. Of course, the conceptual range and temporal development of the terms in Greek texts are inevitably much more complex

than an intermediate lexicon has the capacity to demonstrate. In ancient literature, these words have substantial semantic overlap, and there is need for careful attention to context in order to determine the denotative and connotative meaning of each term in classical, biblical, and Christian texts.⁵⁷ However, two important twentieth century works of scholarship—Anders Nygren’s *Agape and Eros* and C.S. Lewis’ *The Four Loves*—have exerted sufficient influence that these terms have become standard ways of classifying a taxonomy of loves in subsequent philosophical debate. In the many variations of this philosophical tradition, these terms are generally defined in a manner that is similar to the definitions of Liddell and Scott: *éros* refers to desire (often of a sexual, romantic, or aesthetic nature), *philia* to friendship, *storgē* to familial affection, and *agape* to self-sacrificial goodwill for another. According to Bennet Helm, many contemporary philosophers intentionally blur the lines between *éros* and *philia* while ignoring the other categories. Helm suggests an alternative taxonomy for contemporary theories of personal love, consisting of four partially-overlapping categories: love as union, as robust concern, as valuing, and as emotion. Nonetheless, many recent accounts of love still begin with the distinction between these Greek concepts, with debate focusing on their exact meaning and their relations to one another. Several recent theological explorations of love—notably Pope Benedict XVI’s encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*—argue, contra Nygren, that *éros* and *agape* are intrinsically related and co-penetrating according to Christianity. In order to situate my understanding of love, I

⁵⁷ For example, in his *Commentary on the Gospel of John* D.A. Carson famously refutes many homiletical perorations by arguing cogently that *agape* and *philia* are used interchangeably throughout John’s gospel (676-677). The basic problem is that words have histories and ranges of meaning, both of which are sometimes flattened out by philosophers and theologians who treat them as if they are used in a precise, distinct, and historically static meanings.

consider here what is at stake in modern debates about these four Greek concepts of love, beginning with the influential works of Nygren and Lewis.

Central to Nygren's argument is his claim that—despite their frequent conflation—*agape* and *éros* are conceptually incommensurable all the way down. As he puts it: “Eros and Agape belong originally to two entirely separate spiritual worlds, between which no direct communication is possible” (31). Despite this radical incongruence, Nygren cites two reasons for the continual confusion of these concepts. First, he admits freely that for more than a thousand years, the Christian intellectual tradition suggested almost universally that *éros* and *agape* are “most intimately connected with one another” (32). Second, the fact that both of these concepts are translated by the single word “love” (or its analogs in numerous other languages) strongly reinforces the misleading notion that *éros* and *agape* both refer to related aspects of a single reality. According to Nygren, the Protestant reformers disambiguated these two radically opposed conceptions of love, and in so doing brought about a spiritual revolution, which entailed the recovery of authentic Christianity.

Nygren's argument in *Agape and Eros* grows out of the so-called “Lundensian theology” developed by Lutheran intellectuals at Lund University in Sweden during the first half of the twentieth century. Along with other figures associated with this movement—such as Gustaf Aulén and Ragnar Bring—Nygren was interested in exploring “fundamental motifs” of Reformation thought and then tracing these motifs throughout history. After laying out his theory of fundamental motifs and motif-research in the first half of his text, Nygren plunges into his historical and conceptual analysis of the motifs of *agape* and *éros*. He argues that in the mystery religions,

Platonism, Aristoteleanism and Neoplatonism, *éros* is a desire-driven, egocentric, acquisitive love, whereas *agape*, rooted in Christianity, is spontaneous, unmotivated by the value of the beloved object, and creative. According to Nygren, Augustine synthesized a Neoplatonic conception of *éros* with the Christian concept of *agape* in a way that distorted the latter's radical "transvaluation of all ancient values."⁵⁸ This distorting synthesis of two contradictory motifs exerted significant influence throughout the medieval period until Luther, the hero of Nygren's story, recovered a biblical vision of *agape*.

Nygren's provocative argument has stimulated a great deal of subsequent reflection on the nature of love and the relation of various Greek concepts to the love that is upheld as the chief virtue in many texts of the New Testament. In one important contribution to this literature, C.S. Lewis' *The Four Loves* analyzes *agape* and *éros* alongside the concepts of *philia* and *storgē*, but Lewis does not portray the distinctions between these concepts as entailing any radical contradiction. For him, *storgē*, *philia*, and *éros* are all "natural loves": common to human experience, rooted in the created order, and thus good, but capable of corruption. Given humanity's sinfulness, these loves are prone to devolve into selfish passions, in which the loved-one becomes an object for one's own purposes. Thus, *agape*—self-sacrificing, unconditional goodwill for the other, which Lewis understands to be a supernatural gift of grace—must guide and guard the natural loves. In an important respect, this approach is self-consciously distinct from the mainstream of Christian writing on the subject. Whereas many theologians have analyzed a hierarchy of natural and supernatural loves in order to

⁵⁸ For a more carefully nuanced account of Augustine's role in the history of thinking about love, see Bernard Brady, *Christian Love*, 77-124.

praise the supremacy of *agape*—sometimes to the denigration of natural loves—Lewis celebrates the goodness of *storgē*, *philia*, and *éros* as gifts from God that somehow anticipate or point towards *agape*. The glory of *agape* does not mean that the other loves must be renounced, but that they cannot be kept unstained unless they are completed by the even higher gift of *agape*. I would argue that this affirmation of the beauty and dignity of human relationships and emotions is more in keeping with the spirit of the Protestant reformation than Nygren’s view, which pits *agape* and *éros* against one another as polar opposites. However, Nygren does usefully bring to the surface important aspects of scriptural teaching about love that were emphasized by Luther, which I analyze below.

This brief discussion of various classical conceptions of love sets the stage for my argument in important ways. To begin with, it raises the issue of love’s relation to the value of the one beloved. *Eros* is always conceived as some form of response to perceived value in another. Whether this value is physical beauty, a virtuous life, or some other positive quality in the beloved, it is this pre-existing value that evokes love. On the surface at least, this does seem to contrast sharply with *agape*, by which God loves sinners and Christians are called to love their enemies. In these cases, love does not appear to be a response to perceived worth, but some form of will to do good to persons who are clearly unworthy. *Agape* treats people better than they deserve, and, in so doing, it has the power to make them better. God’s love for sinners renews and transforms them, creating value where it did not previously exist. On the other hand, Christian love for God is frequently spoken of as treasuring God above all else or delighting in God’s beauty and goodness. The one who loves God is clearly responding

to preexisting value rather than creating value, which suggests that there is some validity to the Augustinian tradition of seeing *agape* and *éros* as interrelated. This leads to another question about the relationship of love to emotion. *Eros*, *philia*, and *storgē* are all strongly associated with affection or desire. *Agape* on the other hand, is something more—and, perhaps, other—than emotion. Christians generally think of the command to love one’s enemies in terms of willing good for them rather than feeling good about them. And yet, the scripture does clearly associate loving God with delighting in God, and love for fellow Christians is frequently spoken of in terms of familial affection throughout the New Testament. A robust account of love that is capable of guiding life, forming community, and compelling political action will need to address these issues. Before turning to my own constructive theory of love, however, it is useful to consider the most important criticisms that have been leveled against the Christian notion of *agape* as the centerpiece for social ethics. Taking these critiques seriously will help refine a concept of love that is less vulnerable to destructive misappropriations.

4.3. Love’s Critics

The major criticisms of Christian love can be divided into two broad categories, and the first of these is that love is opposed to justice. This criticism is particularly aimed at the Christian emphasis upon loving enemies and forgiving wrongdoers. Since justice requires oppressors and exploiters be defeated and held accountable, the idea that they should be loved and forgiven seems to enable the continuation of injustice. For example, bell hooks celebrates Martin Luther King Jr. as the great modern prophet of

love, but she also claims that he does not adequately emphasize the need to hold people accountable for injustice. Similarly, during King's lifetime, many of King's critics saw his philosophy of nonviolence as a deeply inadequate response to the violent injustice perpetrated on a daily basis against African Americans. Justice seemed to demand resisting such brutal oppression by all means possible, not moralizing about love for one's enemies.

Another way to say this is that political realism requires defeating enemies, rather than loving them, which is the position taken by Alain Badiou in his recent book *In Praise of Love*. Badiou's argument begins with a reaffirmation of the Lacanian pronouncement that there is no such thing as a "sexual relationship," and then develops a theory of love as the construction of a relationship that is absent in the phenomenon of sexual desire. This construction is a process of learning to see the world from the perspective of another and thus relate to the world from the standpoint of "otherness" rather than that of "identity." Badiou claims love must begin with the utter contingency of what we call "falling in love," but it becomes liberating only through the hard work of "fidelity," by which he means vigilant commitment to the other: the continual "reinvention" of love through the vicissitudes and difficulties of life. Badiou notes certain analogies between this philosophy of love and his theory of revolution as a radically contingent event which requires fidelity and continual reinvention to become liberating. Yet he rejects the notion of a "politics of love" because, "The issue of the enemy is completely foreign to the question of love. . . . In politics, the struggle against the enemy constitutes the action. The enemy forms part of the essence of politics. Genuine politics identifies its real enemy" (59). Because the struggle against real

enemies is at the core of Badiou's revolutionary praxis, the idea of loving such an enemy would, in his view, preclude the possibility of such a struggle. The commitment to political liberation must eschew the idea of love.

The most important critic of nonviolent resistance as an expression of Christian love for enemies is Malcolm X. Malcolm argued throughout his career as an activist that violence is a moral and necessary response to violent oppression. For example, in an April 3, 1964 speech titled "The Ballot or the Bullet," which Malcolm addressed to the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) at Cory Methodist Church in Cleveland, Ohio, he mixes playful mockery of his Christian hosts with passionate denunciations of injustice and calls for direct political "action on all fronts by whatever means necessary" (24). Malcolm claims that more racial hatred and violence characterized America in 1964 than it had in 1954, and that—in this incendiary environment—"It'll be ballots, or it'll be bullets. It'll be liberty, or it will be death. The only difference about his kind of death—it'll be reciprocal" (32). Here, as elsewhere in the speech, Malcolm evokes Patrick Henry's famous 1775 speech "Give Me Liberty, or Give Me Death," whereby he ironically identifies the use of violent force by blacks to throw off white oppression with the tradition of the American Revolution. This is morally justified violence, violence for the sake of freedom. With his statement that death will "be reciprocal," he reminds his hearers that white society would have to pay a high price for any attempt to cull violent black resistance, while simultaneously taking a jab at Louis E. Lomax, the CORE representative who opened this assembly with a speech calling for love, reciprocity, and resistance through "turning the other cheek."⁵⁹ Thus,

⁵⁹ Lomax, a prominent black journalist, was largely responsible for introducing Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam to the U.S. public through a television special that aired in 1959 called *The Hate that*

Malcolm suggests that reciprocal violence is the only option when reciprocal justice and love are impossible.

This argument becomes more explicit as the speech continues. Malcolm urges his hearers to “take an uncompromising stand” against political manipulation, tokenism, and the perpetuation of brutal, state-sanctioned violence against black people. He clarifies that taking a stand does not mean going out to “get violent,” but he then qualifies this statement:

at the same time you should never be nonviolent unless you run into some nonviolence. I'm nonviolent with those who are nonviolent with me. But when you drop that violence on me, they you've made me go insane and I'm not responsible for what I do. And that's the way every Negro should get. Any time you know you're within the law, within your legal rights, within your moral rights, in accord with justice, then die within your moral rights, in accord with justice, then die for what you believe in. But don't die alone. Let your dying be reciprocal. This is what is meant by equality. (34)

This appeal to justice, moral rights, and legal rights is part of Malcolm's larger argument, which is that—even after Civil Rights legislations and the Supreme Court have pronounced the nation's segregationist practices to be illegal—local and state police continue enforcing the status quo with violence, flaunting the law. For this reason, Malcolm contends, the black community should stop making Civil Rights appeals to the federal government. Instead, it should bring its case to the United Nations, where it will be supported by the colonized peoples of the global south in an indictment of the United States governments for human rights violations. With morally passionate references to lynchings, the use of police dogs to attack peaceful protestors,

Hate Produced (“Journalist”). Immediately after using the word “reciprocal” in this speech, Malcolm playfully portrays Lomax as an elitist who speaks down to ordinary black people, while presenting himself as a populist: “You know what is meant by ‘reciprocal’? That’s one of Brother Lomax’s words, I stole it from him. I don’t usually deal with those big words because I don’t usually deal with big people. I deal with small people. I find you can get a whole lot of small people and whip hell out of a whole lot of big people” (32).

and the recent bombing of 16th Street Baptist Church—which killed four young black children in the church basement—Malcolm pleads with his audience to do everything necessary to stand against illegality, injustice, and violent oppression.

Five days after delivering his “Ballot or the Bullet Speech,” Malcolm gave another incisive and impassioned address to a meeting sponsored by the socialist Militant Labor Forum at Palm Gardens in New York. In this speech, titled “The Black Revolution,” he once again connects the struggles of the black community in America with international struggles against European colonialism. He argues that three centuries of oppression and violence towards blacks in the United States make it necessary to replace the current social order with an entirely new social order. Reform is inadequate; revolution is needed. While he states that a “bloodless revolution” is still possible in America, he says also that this is not the norm, and that blacks should be prepared to use violence if necessary:

This is a real revolution. Revolution is always based on land.⁶⁰ Revolution is never based on begging somebody for an integrated cup of coffee. Revolutions are never fought by turning the other cheek. Revolutions are never based upon love-your-enemy and pray-for-those-who-spitefully-use-you. And revolutions are never waged singing “We Shall Overcome.” Revolutions are based upon bloodshed. Revolutions are never compromising. Revolutions are never based upon negotiations. Revolutions are never based upon any kind of tokenism whatsoever. Revolutions are never even based upon that which is begging a corrupt society or a corrupt system to accept us into it. Revolutions overturn systems. And there is no system on this earth which has proven itself more corrupt, more criminal, than this system that in 1964 still colonizes 22 million African-Americans, still enslaves 22 million Afro-Americans. (50)

⁶⁰ On the issue of land and black nationalism, Malcolm’s stance changes over time, especially in the last year of his life. In the “Ballot or the Bullet” speech delivered five days earlier, he had described the political and economic philosophy of black nationalism as black-controlled economies and politics in black communities, and he connected this to calling for blacks to use voting rights to elect black leaders for black-majority counties. Thus, it seems that black-controlled land in the United States is part of Malcolm’s political vision at this point. For a well-researched recent analysis of the evolution of such ideas in the political struggles of African Americans, see James Lance Talyor, *Black Nationalism in the United States: From Malcolm X to Barack Obama*.

Here, Malcolm's trademark refusal to compromise with an American system characterized by centuries of violent exploitation and injustice is combined with his typical rejection of the moral convictions and methods that propelled Civil Rights organizations such as SNCC, CORE, and the Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC). Much like Fanon, Badiou, and Marx, he argues that the only way to overcome the current evil order is by establishing a new social order, and this means overcoming real political enemies: enemies who cannot be loved and probably must be killed.⁶¹ For Malcolm, anything short of this amounts to begging for inclusion in the corrupt society of white America.

In order to address such criticisms, a robust theological account of love will need to give serious attention to the ways that love exposes, confronts, resists, and defeats social evil. I have argued in chapter 3 that according to Christian scripture, doing justice means overcoming evil and establishing *shalom* through the means of judgment and grace. In essence, theorists like Badiou and Malcolm X call for this judgment but see it as incompatible with grace. Indeed, scripture itself warns that failing to pass judgment on the guilty aids and abets the perpetuation of social injustice (Prov. 17:15; 18:5 Isa. 5:23). Thus, a praxis of love that is consistent with biblical justice will value forgiveness and reconciliation in a way that maintains accountability. It will also need to think carefully about the role of coercive power in a genuinely Christian pursuit of *shalom* that takes seriously humanity's capacity for recalcitrant evil.

⁶¹ For a recent criticism of nonviolence along distinct but related lines, see Peter Gelderloos' pair of works *How Nonviolence Protects the State* and *The Failure of Nonviolence*. Gelderloos, a committed anarchist, argues that the emphasis upon nonviolent resistance has limited the range of tactics that may be employed by activists and curtailed broader analysis of political strategies. By limiting activists to nonviolent tools, which appeal for the state to amend its ways, the nonviolent movement has protected the state as such. And since he believes the state to be inherently oppressive, this entails perpetuating an unjust status quo. Once again, the presumption is that only by totally abolishing the current social order can a new order of freedom and flourishing be established.

Another major criticism of *agape* is that, by calling for universal love, it becomes incapable of attending to the particularities and differences of individual persons. As such, it is an abstraction that erases individual and cultural difference. Such a concern is apparent in Hannah Arendt's critique of Augustine's theology of love. Arendt claims the Augustinian formula of "loving God and all things in God" calls for universal love of humanity only by reducing all humans to the abstraction of "occasions of the one Good" at the expense of attending to individuals in their concrete particularity. This is the error, from Arendt's perspective, built into the exhortation to love one's enemies. She writes:

The Christian can thus love all people because each one is only an occasion, and that occasion can be everyone. Love preserves its strength precisely in considering even the enemy and even the sinner as mere occasions for love. It is not really the neighbor who is loved in this love of neighbor—it is love itself. Thus the neighbor's relevance as a neighbor . . . is overcome and the individual is left in isolation. (97)

For Arendt, the very idea of loving the enemy requires reducing all humans to abstractions, and such love cannot embrace real, concrete persons. Far from a will-to-embrace the other, the logic of loving one's enemies requires the exclusion of the other.

Martha Nussbaum makes a similar criticism of those Christian thinkers, like Augustine, whose conceptions of love accommodate a Platonic or Neoplatonic idea of love's ascent. In Plato's *Symposium*, Diotima states that *eros* begins by desiring a beautiful body, but it should proceed to desire a beautiful soul and, finally, the metaphysical form of beauty itself. Many Christian thinkers influenced by the Platonic tradition have argued that lower forms of desire and delight should lead the soul upwards to God—the source of all beauty and goodness—the love of whom purifies all lower loves. According to such thinkers (certainly Augustine) this purifying ascent

brings about a proper ordering of loves, in which individuals may be loved rightly, in a way that is untainted by idolatry or the objectifying desire to possess others for oneself. Nussbaum claims, however, that none of the thinkers concerned with reforming humanity's lower loves seem to like real human being very much (845). Consequently, she interprets the modern emphasis on personal affections rather than *agape* as "a counter-tradition that tries to restore human beings to a greater acceptance of their loves as they are, seeing the interest in ascent as a disease that needs curing" (845). In one respect, I have already suggested that C.S. Lewis' *The Four Loves* is an example of this counter-tradition from within. Giving full attention to the power, beauty, and goodness of "natural loves," Lewis sees *agape* as a way of guiding and disciplining such affections so that they do not become destructive. But the question remains how love for one's enemies is consistent with love for individuals in their particularity. This question, too, will need to be addressed by a robust theological account of love. Towards the construction of such an account I now turn.

4.4. Cruciform Love

For the Christian, thinking about the meaning of love begins with the person of Jesus. The New Testament never provides an abstract definition of love; instead, it frequently points to Jesus as the paradigm of love-in-action. The epistles of Paul and John focus on the cross of Christ in this respect: "God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8) "By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers" (1 Jn. 3:16). By concentrating on the story of Jesus's crucifixion, these texts associate love

strongly with self-sacrifice for the good of others. And by emphasizing those whom Jesus loves are “sinners,” Paul makes it clear that love is not motivated by the merits of the beloved person. Love loves the underserving.

When the wider context of these two verses is considered, several more aspects of a biblical theology of love come into focus. The context of Romans 5 is Paul’s argument that all humans are ungodly lawbreakers and thus deserving of God’s wrath, but—nonetheless—God offers forgiveness and reconciliation to sinners through Christ. Paul clearly teaches that this reconciliation is accomplished by the death of Jesus, which he describes as a substitutionary sacrifice (Rom. 3:24-25; 5:8-9; cf. Eph. 5:2). The driving point here is that God freely suffers in order that his enemies might be restored to a relationships of peace with himself (Rom. 5:1, 10-11). The same love that motivates the sacrificial death of the Son is then poured out into the hearts of God’s reconciled former-enemies through the ministry of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 5:5). This pouring out of love into the hearts of those whom God has forgiven has a transforming effect: they are resurrected as the new humanity in Christ (Rom. 5:12-6:14). The mark of this Spirit-empowered new humanity is that it embodies the same love by which it has been created, a self-giving love that pursues the good of all people, even enemies (Rom. 12:9-21; 13:8-10). Thus, the love of God is self-sacrificial, unmotivated by the merits of the beloved object, and possessing the creative power to transform those who are loved.

In 1 John, similar themes are at work. The fourth chapter of this epistle states twice that “God is love” (1 Jn. 4:8, 16). This is a claim about God’s eternal nature, but John say that God’s love is made manifest in human history though the death of Jesus,

who gave himself so that those who did not love him could have eternal life (1 Jn. 4:9-10). The Christian community consists of those who “know” and “believe in” this love that is manifest in Jesus (1 Jn. 4:16), and this knowledge creates new life that is manifest in love for one another (1 Jn. 4:7-8). In chapter 3, Jesus’s self-giving death for others is described as the model for human love (1 Jn. 3:16), and in human relationships this self-giving is described in terms of generously caring for the material needs of others: “But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth” (1 Jn. 3:17-18). In sum, 1 John roots love in the nature of God, and teaches that God’s eternal love is manifest in the death of Jesus for sinners, whom it transforms to become persons who imitate the self-giving love of Christ by caring for others, with an emphasis on meeting material needs.

In the scriptural texts cited above, two important themes emerge: God loves the undeserving, and this unmerited love of God has re-creative power. As noted above, these two themes received particular emphasis in the teaching of Martin Luther. In the 28th thesis of the Heidelberg Disputation, Luther states: “The love of God does not find, but creates, that which is pleasing to it. The love of man comes into being through that which is pleasing to it.” Here the “love of man” corresponds to the “natural loves” described by Lewis, while “the love of God” refers to *agape*, love rooted in the nature of God, which can come to operate in and through humans only by divine grace. The natural, human loves are responsive to external stimuli. The lover in this case is acted upon by an external object, and—in this sense—is “passive” or “passionate” in the etymological meaning of these terms. By contrast, God’s love is a love of agency.

Rather than responding to beauty and goodness, it creates these qualities. This agent-love is also gratuitous. It is not based on any necessity or lack on the part of the lover. Rather, it is freely given.

The importance of Luther's contribution on these themes justifies a detailed analysis of the "proof" for this thesis that was published as part of the Heidelberg Disputation. In this proof, Luther defends the 28th thesis and elaborates on its two parts: first, that God's love creates what is pleasing to it, and second, that human love comes into being as a response to that which it finds pleasing. He writes:

The second part is clear and is accepted by all philosophers and theologians, for the object of love is its cause, assuming, according to Aristotle, that all power of the soul is passive and material and active only in receiving something. Thus it is also demonstrated that Aristotle's philosophy is contrary to theology since in all things it seeks those things which are its own and receives rather than gives something good. The first part is clear because the love of God which lives in man loves sinners, evil persons, fools, and weaklings in order to make them righteous, good, wise, and strong. Rather than seeking its own good, the love of God flows forth and bestows good. Therefore sinners are "attractive" because they are loved; they are not loved because they are "attractive": For this reason the love of man avoids sinners and evil persons. Thus Christ says: "For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners" (Matt. 9:13). This is the love of the cross, born of the cross, which turns in the direction where it does not find good which it may enjoy, but where it may confer good upon the bad and needy person. "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35), says the Apostle. Hence Ps. 41:1 states, "Blessed is he who considers the poor," for the intellect cannot by nature comprehend an object which does not exist, that is the poor and needy person, but only a thing which does exist, that is the true and good. Therefore it judges according to appearances, is a respecter of persons, and judges according to that which can be seen, etc.

Luther begins by identifying the Aristotelian conception of love with "human love," which cannot be projected onto the divine nature. This point is part of Luther's broader polemic against certain forms of scholastic theology, highly influenced by Aristotle, that tended to begin with rational reflection upon the natural world from which ideas about God would be subsequently extrapolated. Luther strongly rejects this tendency,

which ends up worshipping an idolatrous projection of “super humanity.” In the 19th thesis of the Heidelberg Disputation, Luther had already asserted: “That person does not deserve to be called a theologian who looks upon the ‘invisible’ things of God as though they were clearly ‘perceptible in those things which have actually happened’ (Rom. 1:20; cf. 1 Cor 1:21-25).” On the contrary, Luther’s 20th thesis declares, “true theology always begins with God’s self-disclosure in the sufferings of Christ: “he deserves to be called a theologian, however, who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross.” Having already proclaimed that the starting point of theology is always God’s self-disclosure to humanity in and through the sufferings of Christ, Luther now applies this general principle to his account of divine love. To start with a human conception of love derived from Aristotle, a love which “receives rather than gives something good,” and then project this upon God, produces deeply inadequate notions of God and humanity. On this account, God’s love is a response to human worthiness. But, according to biblical teaching, God’s love is freely disposed upon sinners, and this initiating, unmerited love of God is what creates the possibility that these sinners might become saints.

Luther elaborates this final point in the remaining portion of his proof for the 28th thesis. God does not love human “sinners” because they are “attractive”; rather, they can become “attractive” because God loves them. Whereas the natural human intellect is capable only of loving that which is already “true and good,” the love of God revealed on the cross “turns in the direction where it does not find good which it may enjoy, but where it may confer good upon the bad and needy person.” God’s love is a freely bestowed gift upon the undeserving, and this gift has a transforming affect. It

inspires repentance, faith, love, mercy, and justice. Thus the moral goodness and beauty for which Christians strive is not an effort to obtain divine love, but a fruit of the love that has already been bestowed.

While Anders Nygren and Tuomo Mannermaa are correct in their arguments that Luther's theology of love represents a major paradigm shift in sixteenth century theology, it is equally important to note that his arguments here are neither novel nor idiosyncratic within the Christian tradition. On the contrary, Luther is self-consciously bringing to the forefront an understanding of Christian scripture that was clearly affirmed by a wide spectrum of fifth-century Western theologians in response to the controversy between Pelagius and Augustine about grace and freewill. While both parties in this controversy affirmed that human rational agency remains an essential aspect of the *imago Dei*, Augustine strongly affirmed biblical teaching that human nature has been corrupted by sin to such a degree that humans cannot turn to God apart from God's enabling grace. According to this view, which won wide approval in the early Western church, conversion is not a matter of free wills choosing rightly but of bound wills being freed by the grace of God.⁶² In 529, the Second Council of Orange offered a vigorous biblical defense of the Augustinian tradition over-against views that have been termed "semi-Pelagian," and the discussion of God's grace for sinners in this council included important declarations on the nature of divine love. Canon 12 of this council states: "God loves us for what we shall be by his gift, and not by our own deserving." Like the 28th thesis of Luther's Heidelberg Disputation, this canon affirms that God's love creates, rather than responds to, human goodness. Canon 25 of this

⁶² The Augustinian view of grace contra Pelagius was affirmed at the councils of Carthage (418) and Ephesus (431), the latter of which is considered the third ecumenical council by many churches in both the Western and Eastern traditions.

council adds: “It is wholly a gift of God to love God. He who loves, even though he is not loved, allowed himself to be loved. We are loved, even when we displease him, so that we might have means to please him. For the Spirit, whom we love with the Father and the Son, has poured into our hearts the love of the Father and the Son.” With language that draws upon Romans 5 as well as 1 John 3-4, this canon upholds a vision of divine love as that which is freely poured out on sinners, creating in them the capacity to love God with the love of the Father and the Son.

It is my contention that Luther’s conception of divine love as free, gratuitous, and creative is the authentic Christian view, rooted in a biblical theology of the cross and most clearly affirmed within the Augustinian and Reformation traditions of reflection upon scripture. The human embodiment of this divine love—rather than natural loves, which are good in their own right—is what the New Testament upholds as the chief Christian virtue. Such love is freely poured out, regardless of one’s estimation of the worthiness of the beloved, and it has a creative capacity to transform the one who is loved. Not surprisingly, these claims lead to several key questions. What is the relationship between divine love for humans and the biblical claim that God is love, which theologians have traditionally linked with the doctrine of the Trinity? And what is the relationship between human embodiment of divine love and the other forms of human love—friendship, familial affection, romantic passion—which comprise such an important part of human social existence? In the next two sections, I consider these questions in turn.

4.5. Love and the Triune God

The repeated affirmation of 1 John that “God is love” bears special significance for Christians. In his helpful commentary on John’s first epistle, Robert W. Yarbrough claims that this aspect of Christian teaching about the nature of God is unique among world religions, though it has some precedent in the recurring emphasis upon God’s steadfast love throughout the Hebrew scriptures (237). To talk about love, for Christians, is to talk about the nature of God. However, Yarbrough is wise to note also that this affirmation carries with it a certain temptation to start with some conception of love rooted in human experience and then idolatrously project this upon God, effectively reversing the biblical affirmation by suggesting that love is God (237). For the Christian theologian, God’s radical transcendence means that it is wrong to begin with rational reflection on human experience and then develop a concept of God by projecting a bigger and better version of human ideals. Rather, Christian theology begins with reflection upon God’s self-disclosure in all of his words and works, but preeminently in the person of Jesus, who is “the image of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15) and “the exact imprint of his nature” (Heb. 1:3). Jesus is the revelation of God to humanity, and it is in the crucifixion of Jesus that the God is revealed to be love.

This raises the questions: What is it about God’s eternal nature as love that is revealed through the suffering of the incarnate Son? To begin answering this question, it is helpful to turn to the gospel of John. In particular, the “high priestly prayer” of Jesus to the Father in John 17 is a central passage for considering how the glory of divine love is displayed through the death of Jesus.⁶³ At the beginning of this chapter, Jesus prays,

⁶³ For an exegetically detailed and theologically sensitive interpretation of this passage, see Herman Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary*, 546-568.

“Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you” (Jn. 17:1). This prayer is positioned within the narrative of John directly before Christ’s arrest and crucifixion, and it is precisely at the hour of Jesus’s death that he is glorified by the Father. This is in keeping with the recurrent theme in John’s gospel that Jesus is enthroned and glorified upon the cross. Throughout the chapter, Jesus prays for his disciples and for all who will believe in him through their witness. Towards the end of this prayer, he prays that all who believe in him will be one even as he and the Father are one (17:21). This leads to a key passage:

The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me. Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. (Jn. 17:22-24)

The language of giving recurs throughout this passage. The Father has given glory to the Son. The Father has given those who trust in Jesus to the Son. The Son has given to this community of believers the same glory that he received from the Father. The language of glory here evokes the beginning of this prayer, in which Jesus states that he is glorified by the Father precisely through being crucified by his enemies. In this passage, glory is also associated closely with unity in love. The unity of the believing community is meant to be a witness to the fact that the Father loves this people even as he loves the Son. Indeed, in the closing statement of this passage, Jesus prays that the whole community of believers will be with him, to see the glory that he has possessed precisely because he has been loved by the Father “before the foundation of the world.” Here Jesus speaks of his relationship of love with the Father as something that existed

before creation, and he prays that—as a result of his own mediatorial work on the cross—the community of believers will enter into this eternal communion of love.⁶⁴

Christian theologians throughout history have rightly seen in this text an important aspect of the doctrine of the Trinity. John’s gospel began with the assertion that Jesus is the incarnation of the eternal word of God who was with God and was God before creation, through whom all things are created, and who has come into the world full of grace and truth to reveal God and draw humanity to God (Jn. 1:1-18). John has also taught that the Son—after his death and resurrection—will send into the world the Holy Spirit, who draws humanity to God in Christ (Jn. 14:15-27; 15:26; 16:7-11). In John 17:24, Jesus speaks of his redemptive activity as designed to bring those who believe in him into a loving union and communion that has eternally existed between the Father and the Son. In other words, the phrase “God is love” does not speak exclusively or even primarily of God’s love for humanity. Rather, this love of God for creatures is itself an expression of the eternal reality of love between the divine persons. Love is intrinsic to the divine nature. Creation is not a lonely God’s effort to find company; it is the overflow of divine community. That humans who bear the divine image are inherently relational (Gen. 1:26-27; 2:18) is an expression of the relationally that is God.

At least since John of Damascus—a prominent sixth-century Greek theologian—Christians have spoken of the relationship between the divine persons as

⁶⁴ John’s gospel emphasizes throughout that the aim of Jesus’s saving action, which culminates in his death and resurrection, is to give eternal life to those who believe in him. In John 17:3, Jesus clarifies that the essence of this “eternal life” is to know the Father and the Son. Knowing here is not only intellectual, but also relational and experiential. Jesus’s prayer at the end of this chapter that those who believe in him may be one with one another and with himself speaks of the same reality of knowing the Father and the Son. The eternal life which Jesus dies to make accessible to sinners is, in essence, a matter of entering into the eternal community of love that constitutes the triune nature of God.

perichoresis, which means “mutual indwelling” or “being-in-one-another” (Migliore 82). Jesus speaks of this mutual indwelling in the high priestly prayer, when he asks that those who believe in him “may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you” (Jn.17:21). Moreover, the relationships between the divine persons are consistently spoken of in scripture with language that implies certain directionality. The one who becomes incarnate as Jesus Christ is the Word from the Father, the Son of the Father, the image of the Father, the radiance of the Father’s glory, the exact imprint of the divine nature. In all of this language, there is an implication of the Son’s from-ness, and this from-ness is also apparent in the historical event of the Father sending the Son into the world. Likewise, the Spirit is spoken of as one who “proceeds from the Father” and whom Jesus “sends from the Father” (Jn. 15:26). Theologians have seen in the historical sending of the Son and the Spirit (often referred to as the “missions” of the “economic trinity”) a revelation or performance of an eternal from-ness that is immanent to the nature of God. Orthodox theology speaks of the Son being eternally “begotten” or “generated” from the Father, and of the Spirit eternally “proceeding” or “spirating” from the Father.⁶⁵ (In the Western tradition, theologians have also seen fit to say that the Spirit proceeds from the Son.) This is not to say that they are created by the Father, for the divine persons are eternally coequal and coexistent, sharing one divine nature. This language about the divine processions foregrounds that an eternal giving and receiving of light, life, and love constitutes the very nature of God. The transcendent “I am,” in

⁶⁵ In the Western theological tradition, Augustine’s *The Trinity* is by far the most important exposition of this aspect of Trinitarian doctrine. Augustine speaks of the harmonious beauty with which the Son perfectly expresses the glory of the Father “as one perfect Word to which nothing is lacking, which is like the art of the almighty and wise God.” He declares that this union between the Father and the Son is “not without enjoyment, without charity, without happiness” and then refers to the Holy Spirit as “the sweetness of the begetter and begotten” such that the Trinity “is the source of all things, and the most perfect beauty, and wholly blissful delight” (X.11-12). For a highly competent recent presentation of this area of Trinitarian theology from a Protestant perspective, see Fred Sanders, *The Triune God*.

whom all finite beings exist, is a community of being, an immutable dance of giving-and-receiving love. Absolute reality is peaceful difference, beloved community.

4.6. Judgment, Grace, and Beloved Community

My exposition of the Christian claim that God is eternal triune love raises another set of questions: What does it mean to say that the impassable self-giving of divine love is revealed through the passion of Jesus? How is it that the joy of God in communion with God is expressed most fully in the agony of crucifixion? Why do Christians believe that the beauty of divine love is disclosed in the ugly spectacle of a Jewish prophet's unjust execution at the hands of a power-hungry empire? If entering into divine love is the essence of eternal life, how is this love made manifest by death? To answer these question requires building upon the theories of evil and justice developed in the first two parts of this dissertation.

In contemporary American popular culture, love is sometimes conceived as unconditional affirmation and acceptance, but such an understanding of love would necessarily make it an unjust accomplice of evil in the world. From a Christian perspective, abusers and oppressors may be loved, but they cannot be affirmed and accepted while they continue exploiting other human beings. God's love is a creative love that moves the world towards wholeness, and this means that God's love is also characterized by an absolute rejection of evil. The divine "yes" to the world is inseparable from the divine "no" that stands against the world's evil. The love of God is manifest in a broken world as consuming judgment and healing grace.

One way to express this point is by a creative synthesis of two New Testament affirmations: God is love, and God is a consuming fire (1 Jn. 4:8, 16; Heb. 12:29). The self-giving that is God's eternal nature as trinity is manifest as God's self-giving love to the world in all of God's acts of creation and redemption. God pursues the good of the world, the joy of human beings, the flourishing of human community, not because humans are deserving of divine favor, but because God is love. However, this love of God burns against all evil and injustice. Rudolph Otto has famously emphasized the importance of fire as a metaphor for God's holiness. On one hand, the warmth, color, light, and movement of fire attracts humans; on the other hand, it consumes those who get too close. Likewise, scripture depicts the holy God as a God of grace, generosity, and beauty who gives life to the world; however, it also depicts God's holiness as an unconditional judgment upon evil that threatens to consume a sinful humanity. The image of fire frequently recurs in a way that highlights these aspects of God's character throughout the scriptures. When God appears to Moses to give the law on Mount Sinai, scripture declares that the "appearance of the glory of the LORD was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel" (Ex. 24:17). The law is a revelation of God's moral character, which gives life to those who live by it, but—since no humans do actually live by it in a thorough and consistent way—this life-giving law becomes a revelation of God's judgment upon sinful humankind. Psalm 50 describes God's holy wrath against people who have God's law on their lips and yet continue to practice injustice in these terms: "Our God comes; he does not keep silence; before him is a devouring fire, around him a mighty tempest. He calls to the heavens above and to the earth, that he may judge his people" (Ps. 50:3-4). For those who refuse

to heed God's warnings and offers of forgiveness, God's holiness and goodness are experienced as consuming judgment. But to those who confess and turn from sin, God's goodness is still manifest as a fire that refines and recreates. To the repentant remnant of Israel in exile that has passed through judgment and experienced spiritual renewal, Isaiah declares the word of the Lord: "Behold, I have refined you, but not as silver; I have tried you in the furnace of affliction" (Isa. 48:10; cf. Zec. 13:9; 1 Cor. 3:13; 1 Pet. 1:7). God's love pursues the good for those whom he loves, which negates the possibility of unconditional affirmation for human creatures possessing many self-destructive patterns of behavior. This love exposes their evil and consumes it, so that the beloved may emerge renewed, transformed, recreated. The love of God is a consuming fire.

Nowhere are God's gracious "yes" to those whom he loves and God's just "no" to their evil more apparent than at the cross of Jesus. Here God loves the ungodly, loves his enemies, pursues the good of the undeserving. But this love is not unconditional affirmation and acceptance. The cross of Jesus upholds the witness of the divine law that divine goodness is a fire that consumes evil in holy wrath. But God takes this wrath upon himself in the person of the incarnate Son. Here God's judgment and grace meet. God judges evil but shows grace to evildoers by bearing this judgment himself.

These themes of judgment, grace, justice, and love converge in a crucial passage of Paul's epistle to the Romans:

Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin. But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—the righteousness of God through faith in

Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. (Rom. 3:19-26)

Here the law of God is said to subdue all human boasting. Every self-justifying mouth is stopped by the revelation of God's holiness in the law because the law reveals precisely that all humans—"without distinction" based on religion or ethnicity—are complicit in the evil and brokenness of the world. Wherever humans would stand in a posture of self-righteousness, calling upon divine justice to consume the evil that is "out there," the law of God reveals that evil is also "in here." To establish justice by pouring out wrath everywhere that it is deserved would mean the annihilation of humanity. But the righteousness of God—which is borne witness in the law and prophets of the Hebrew scriptures—has now broken into the world in a new way through the self-giving love of Jesus Christ.

This righteousness is manifest as forgiveness and acceptance of "all who believe" in Christ. Such faith entails a confession that that one who believes is in need of redemption. It includes an admission of guilt, an acknowledgement that God is righteous and humanity is not. In other other words, this confession of faith is an expression of repentance and radical dependence upon divine grace. Through this confession, the believer enters into solidarity with Christ, in whose propitiatory death human sinfulness is judged. Later in this letter, Paul will argue that this union with Christ in his death also leads to a union with Christ in his resurrection. But here, he emphasizes upon the fact that God's judging and forgiving love—God's righteousness towards those who trust him—is manifest in the cross of Jesus, through which God is

both “just” (judging evil) and “the justifier” of those who entrust themselves to Christ (forgiving and accepting those who have perpetrated evil). In his famous commentary on Romans, Karl Barth remarks upon these verses: “The righteousness of God is our standing-place in the air—that is to say, where there is no human possibility of standing—whose foundations are laid by God Himself and supported always by him only The mercy of God triumphs! . . . We see men under judgment, yet nevertheless thereby set aright” (94-95). In this judgment and mercy of God through Christ’s sacrificial self-giving to the underserving, humans witness the fullest manifestation of that holy love which is God’s eternal nature as triune God.⁶⁶

It is also important to emphasize that the end of Christ’s redeeming love is not merely the forgiveness of individuals but the creation of peaceful community. In Romans, Paul emphasizes that God’s justification of the ungodly through Christ leads not only to a new relationship of peace between God and those whom he redeems (Rom. 5:1) but also to a new way of life that is expressed in communities of love, justice, forgiveness, and hospitality (Rom. 12-13). This new community of peace—the new humanity in Christ Jesus (Eph. 2:11-22)—is empowered by the Holy Spirit to embody a way of life that participates in the triune life of God and embodies a faithful witness to God’s eternal existence as loving communion.

There are thus good theological reasons for Martin Luther King Jr.’s repeated claim that Christian love always aims toward the creation of a reconciled community of

⁶⁶ I am emphasizing a classic Protestant understanding of the doctrine of justification, over against the Roman Catholic position and the reformulation of some proponents of the “New Perspective on Paul.” For a highly competent history of the doctrine of justification in Christian thought, see Alister McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification*. For recent exegetical commentaries defending the position that I have taken, see Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, and Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*. For a helpful survey of historic Pauline interpretation that seeks to defend classic Protestantism in the light of recent critiques, see Stephen Westerholm, *Perspectives Old and New on Paul: The “Lutheran” Paul and His Critics*.

justice and peace. In his famous essay “An Experiment in Love,” King distinguishes between *agape*—the “understanding, creative, redemptive love” of God that is the pinnacle of Christian ethics—and other forms of love. He then proceeds to state the following about Christian love:

Agape is love seeking to preserve and create community. It is insistence on community even when one seeks to break it. *Agape* is a willingness to go to any length to restore community. It doesn't stop at the first mile, but it goes the second mile to restore community. It is a willingness to forgive, not seven times, but seventy times seven to restore community. The cross is the eternal expression of the length to which God will go in order to restore broken community. The resurrection is a symbol of God's triumph over all the forces that seek to block community. The Holy Spirit is the continuing community creating reality that moves through history. He who works against community is working against the whole of creation. (20)

Here King rightly upholds the cross as the central revelation of God's love, which offers forgiveness and thus restores community that is broken. Christian love—as a response to this initiating love of God that is empowered by the Holy Spirit—thus participates with God in the self-giving pursuit of restored community. Just as sin is a vandalism of the peaceful order of God's creation, so redemptive love seeks to restore the peaceful community that has been broken. For Christians, the self-giving, reconciling, community-creating love of Christ on the cross is the most perfect revelation in history of the hidden love that constitutes God's eternal life as trinity, and the love of Christ's disciples is a participation in the work of God's Spirit to bring into fruition the reconciled community made possible by the death of Christ.

4.7. Christian Love as a Response to Divine Grace

Thus far, I have argued that God's eternal nature is loving communion, and that this nature—which shapes all of God's relations to humanity—is revealed most fully in

the community-creating love of Christ on the cross. Through God's acts of creation and redemption, the divine community of Father, Son, and Spirit is opened up to human beings. Sin is a turning from God, a rejection of participation in this loving communion, and by turning from God, humans turn from love, joy, and peace. Sin is self-destructive, a privation of human nature, which carries within itself the seeds of annihilation. But sin damages more than the self; it is always already social in character. To sin is to vandalize shalom, to sow seeds of destruction in the human community. The death of Christ on the cross simultaneously pronounces God's judgment upon human evil and accomplishes the redemption of humanity. This love of God is not called forth by human merit. It is totally free. It is gratuitous. The love of God for sinful humanity is not an expression of humanity's God-independent value, but an expression of God's nature as grace and love. However, this gracious love—which is prevenient, going before any repentance or faith—calls for a response. Indeed, since the goal of divine love is to restore human wholeness—the dignity and joy that can only be fully realized in communion with God—it cannot be accomplished by anything other than a radical transformation of sinners. In this sense, love makes demands. By seeking the flourishing of the one beloved, God's love aims at repentance. This does not mean that God's love offers some good that is independent of human repentance while refusing to give this good unless human repentant. On the contrary, the good that humans need is precisely repentance, which is the restoration of the human person, the recovery of human dignity, the renewal of humanity's capacity to live peaceably in community, knowing and delighting in one another and in God. Divine love creates the possibility of the human response to God, which is humanity's only hope for lasting joy.

I have already said that this response may be called “repentance,” which means a radical reorientation of the self, a turning-back towards God. But the nature of this repentance may be further elaborated. According to the New Testament, repentance consists of two divinely enabled human responses—faith and love—which, when properly understood, are inseparable. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul writes that sinful humans can be justified by God—forgiven, acquitted by the divine judge, reckoned righteous, accepted into covenantal communion with God—only as a gift of free grace on the basis of the cross of Christ. Paul teaches, further, that humans receive this gift by faith and faith alone. Such faith is a response to God’s initiating love in Christ. It is, essentially, a movement of the will to trust this love, which also means entrusting oneself to the God who loves. This ability to trust is itself enabled by God’s creative, prevenient grace, and it transforms the whole person. To trust God’s love and entrust oneself to it entails a change at the core of one’s agency. This trusting of God carries within it a delight in God, an awe in God’s unfathomable grace, a yielding to God’s wisdom and authority. To love God is not a separate and additional human response that may or may not be added to faith; rather, the faith of which Paul speaks already loves God. But loving God is not like loving a creature, for God has no needs. God is the fulfillment of every human need. To love God is simply to be satisfied, to find deep and resilient joy, by opening oneself up to the fullness of life God offers to humanity through communion with himself. Love brings us to God, to enter the divine dance of God’s eternal delight in God as a communion of three persons.

But this centripetal movement of love that brings humans to God is also centrifugal. The love of God in which humans come to participate by repentant faith

does not close in upon itself. Rather, God's works of creation and redemption reveal that divine love ever opens out. It creates. It invites. It welcomes others. It is hospitality. Its will towards community is fruitful and generative. It creates and reconciles. To trust God is to love God, which means learning the joy of participation in God's love for all things. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul puts this point tersely by defining the fruit of his gospel in the life of Christ's disciples as "faith working through love." Trust for God creates love for God, which spills over in love for other human beings. A very similar idea is present in 1 John, which elegantly summarizes the nature of Christian discipleship with the words, "We love because he first loved us" (1 Jn. 4:19). Christian response to God's triune love, poured out for humanity through the cross of Christ, is repentance, which means love-producing trust in the God who has thus made himself accessible to broken human beings.

More needs to be said, however, about the relationship between loving God and loving people. The *agape* of God revealed on the cross is self-giving love, which pursues the good of the one who is loved. It is easy to see how God loves humanity in this way, but it is another thing entirely to imagine what it could mean for humans to give themselves for the good of God. After all, God is eternally self-sufficient—fullness of joy and peace—and no finite creature could add anything to the infinite, generative plenitude of the divine life. In the words of Paul: "Who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor? Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid? For from him and through him and to him are all things" (Rom. 11:34-36). Paul's effusive praise of the creator's self-sufficient glory also raises real questions regarding the structure of Christian love. The eternal, triune sharing of light, life, and

love is disclosed to humanity by the cross, the paradigm of *agape*, in which God borrows human frailty in order to suffer for the good of undeserving creatures in desperate straits, but humans who have been moved by this love to reciprocate cannot do so in kind, for God has no needs to meet. Perhaps the most powerful scriptural text that speaks directly to this issue is Jesus' parable of final judgment in Matthew 25:31-46. In this famous passage, those whom the Son of Man welcomes into his Father's kingdom are pronounced blessed because they loved him sacrificially when he was hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, an immigrant, and a prisoner (25:33-36). Those who receive this blessing wonder when they ever ministered to the needs of the Son of Man, to which he replies: "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me" (25:40). Their love for Christ—the Son of God who needs nothing, from whose "fullness" they have received "grace upon grace" (Jn. 1:16)—has been expressed in their love for human beings, particularly those whom Jesus calls "the least of these my brothers." Just as God borrows human weakness in order to suffer for humanity out of love, so God identifies himself with human vulnerability and need in order to receive love that is offered to hurting human beings.⁶⁷ Or, to approach this from the human angle, those who have received God's self-giving love in Christ and been

⁶⁷ Epiphanius the Latin, in his *Interpretation of the Gospels*, waxes eloquent on this point:

Does our Lord hunger and thirst? Is he who himself made everything in heaven and on earth, who feeds angels in heaven and every nation and race on earth, who needs nothing of an earthly character, as he is unfailing in his own nature, is this one naked? It is incredible to believe such a thing. Yet what must be confessed is easy to believe. For the Lord hungers not in his own nature but in his saints; the Lord thirsts not in his own nature but in his poor. The lord who clothes everyone is not naked in his own nature but in his servants. The Lord who is able to heal all sicknesses and has already destroyed death itself is not diseased in his own nature but in his servants. Our Lord, the one who can liberate every person, is not in prison in his own nature but in his saints. (Simonetti 234)

In his solidarity with his people, the Son of God suffers and needs. Thus, the lovers of Christ find the opportunity to love him sacrificially by loving him in other people.

moved to reciprocate may sacrificially pour out love for him by freely giving themselves to care for human beings, whom Jesus calls his brothers.

The phrase “the least of these, my brothers” in Matthew 25:40 likely refers in the first instance to Jesus’ disciples, and—from the perspective of the first readers of Matthew’s gospel—the church. Throughout the gospel, Jesus frequently uses the phrase “these little ones” (10:42; 18:6, 10, 14) and the word “brothers” (12:50; 28:10) to refer to his disciples (France 964). Yet, as R.T. France points out, Jesus is applying to his community a general principle that is stated in Proverbs 19:17, “Whoever is generous to the poor lends to the Lord” (cf. Prov. 14:31). As is usual throughout the New Testament, the emphasis is placed upon learning to love others in the Christian community, but this same love is to be extended to outsiders and enemies (see Matt. 5:43-47; Lk. 6:27-36; Gal. 6:10). Thus, an order of love becomes apparent. God’s love for his people in Christ, and Christian growth involves an ever-increasing apprehension of this love (Eph. 3:16-19) This deepening knowledge and trust of God’s love calls forth a response of reciprocating love for God, which is then expressed in a gratuitous care for the wellbeing of others—beginning within the Christian community and then working outwards—that is modeled after the free self-giving of Jesus on the cross (Jn. 13:34-35; 1 Jn. 3:16-18; 1 Jn. 4:7-21). To formulate this concisely: The love of God evokes love for God, which is expressed in love for the Christian community and then extended as love for all people.

Martin Luther’s treatise *On Christian Freedom* beautifully captures this structure of Christian love as a response to God’s initiating grace. In the first part of this work, Luther makes his famous argument that sinners are justified—forgiven and

accepted as righteous by God—by grace through faith in Christ, without respect to any merits of their own. For this reason, Luther rejects any notion that works of love are necessary to gain divine favor, which would simultaneously diminish the glory of God’s grace and make the neighbor whom one claims to love a mere means for attaining the salvation that one wants for oneself. But, since Christians have already been fully embraced by God’s love despite their unworthiness, they are free to love their neighbors for the neighbors’ sake, attending only to the wellbeing of the one loved. Luther writes of the Christian who has thus understood the gospel of grace:

He should reason thus: “Look at me, an unworthy and damned creature. Apart from all merit and by pure, free mercy, my God has given me in Christ all the riches of righteousness and salvation. So I no longer need anything at all, except faith, which believes that this is so. For such a Father as this, therefore, who has overwhelmed me with these infinite riches of His—why should I not freely, cheerfully, with my whole heart, and with willing eagerness do whatever I know to be pleasing and acceptable before Him? And so I shall give myself as a sort of Christ to my neighbor, as Christ has given Himself to me. I shall intend to do nothing in this life except what I see will be necessary, advantageous, and salutary for my neighbor, since through faith I abound in all good things in Christ.” Behold in this manner from faith there flows love and joy in the Lord. From love there flows a cheerful, willing, free spirit for the voluntary service of the neighbor, such that it has no basis in gratitude or ingratitude, praise or blame, gain or loss. For neither does it do that men may be obliged to it, nor does it distinguish between friends and enemies. (73)

The beginning here is the knowledge of human sinfulness and divine grace. Those who trust they are loved by God despite being “unworthy and damned” in themselves are moved to love “such a Father as this.” This love for the Father seeks to do whatever pleases God, not in an effort to earn salvation, but “freely” and “cheerfully,” as a response to divine grace. And what pleases God is giving oneself to one’s neighbors as freely as Christ gave himself for his enemies. Without binding others to themselves or weighing their relative merits, Christians cheerfully pursue their good in imitation of Jesus.

In this structure of love, the unity of the twofold “great commandment” becomes evident. All three synoptic gospels record Jesus citing Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18 to the effect that the heart of the scriptures is to love God with one’s whole being and to love one’s neighbors as oneself (Mat. 22:34-40; Mk. 12:28-31; Lk. 10:25-28). The order in which Jesus cites these texts is indicative of the order of love that I have described: responding love for God is expressed in love for one’s neighbors. The two cannot be separated. Love for God necessarily means love for one’s neighbor, who bears God’s image, whom God loves, and in whom Christ is to be served and cared for.

4.8. Love, Affections, and Value

The forgoing analysis paves the way for me to turn again to questions about love raised in my earlier discussion of the relationship between *agape* and *eros*: Should Christian love be thought of as responding to value, creating value, or some combination of the two? And what role, if any, do the emotions play in this love? To approach such questions, it is helpful to begin with a consideration of Paul’s famous hymn to love in 1 Corinthians 13. Verses 4-8 fill in some of the details of what it means to imitate the self-giving love of Jesus in the daily details of human relationship: love is patient, kind, humble, considerate, willing to yield, forgiving, truthful, trusting, hopeful, and persevering. The beginning and end of the chapter celebrate the superiority of love to all other virtues while teaching that “good deeds” performed without love are morally bankrupt. Particularly noteworthy from the opening of the hymn is Paul’s statement: “If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing” (13:3). If love is merely self-sacrificing action for the good of others, then

this statement makes little sense. There are few actions more self-sacrificial than giving away all of one's possessions for others, and Paul's statement about delivering one's body to the flames, though somewhat mysterious, clearly references the ultimate self-sacrifice, possibly through martyrdom. And yet, Paul says that these acts could be performed without love, and in such a case they would be worthless. Apparently, then, love consists not only in a certain kind of action, but also a certain kind of motivational or psychological orientation. The question of what this other something is that ought to lie behind self-sacrificial actions for the good of others is the cause of much subsequent theological reflection and debate.

R. Mohrlang speaks for many biblical interpreters when he argues that, for Paul, the internal orientation needed for genuine love involves the human affections. He writes:

Love is not simply a matter of doing good or showing mercy but is to spring from a sense of genuine care and compassion. It is to be real and heartfelt—merely going through the motions will not suffice. And it must be expressed with a sense of warmth and affection if it is to be truly perceived as love. The importance of this in Paul's thinking may be seen in his urging of his readers to communicate their affection for one another . . . and in his repeated affirmation of his affection for them. (577)

Mohrlang's interpretation is plausible, given Paul's frequent association of affection with love (e.g. Rom. 12:10; Phil. 1:8; 2:1; 1 Thess. 3:6), but it raises several theoretical and practical questions. Are warmth and affection supposed to be felt when loving one's enemies and persecutors, or does this only apply to friends or fellow Christians? What should one do when such emotions are absent? Is it worthwhile to persist in the actions of love if the underlying emotions are not present? Thinking through such questions is essential to a robust account of love.

This point is all the more important given the Christian emphasis upon loving enemies. The love of God revealed in Christ is precisely a love for sinners—those who made themselves enemies of God—which transforms them and establishes a new relationship of friendship and peace (Rom. 5:1, 10). Jesus not only tells his disciples to love one another as he has loved them; he also tells them repeatedly to love their enemies. Consider, for example, Matthew 5:43-47:

You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?

In this text, Jesus contrasts the universal benevolence of God with the general tendency of humans—including Gentiles and tax collectors, whom his audience viewed as morally inferior—to care only for those with whom they have some shared interest or social bond. To love one’s enemies is a mark of the true children of God (cf. Lk. 6:35).

In both Matthew and Luke, Jesus’ teaching regarding love for enemies is closely associated with his instructions about non-retaliation. As Luke’s gospel has it: “To one who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also, and from one who takes away your cloak do not withhold your tunic either. Give to everyone who begs from you, and from one who takes away your goods do not demand them back. And as you wish that others would do to you, do so to them” (Lk. 6:29-31). Interestingly, Luke places the oft-cited “golden rule” in the midst of a passage on non-retaliation and enemy-love. The implication seems to be that no one who is honest and self-aware will want to be loved only according to her desserts. Rather, humans in general would like to be treated better than they have merited. Certainly, anyone who has a Jewish or Christian understanding

of divine holiness and human sinfulness will want to be treated better than they deserve by God. But even in human relationships, there are perhaps few people who are not conscious of behaving badly towards others whom they hope will not behave badly towards them in return. The deep human yearning for revenge against one's enemies is matched by a deep hope that one's enemies will not successfully wreak vengeance upon oneself. This point is made even more explicit in Jesus' subsequent words in this passage: "Judge not, and you will not be judged; condemn not, and you will not be condemned; forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For with the measure you use it will be measured back to you" (Lk. 6:38-39). In my discussion of forgiveness below I return to the question of how this non-retaliatory, non-judgmental love for enemies can be comparable with a commitment to justice, but, for now, the more immediate question is: If love involves the affections, then how is it even possible to love one's enemies? It is one thing to will the good for an antagonist, but quite another thing to feel like doing so.

Part of the issue here is that concepts such as emotion, affection, and passion are generally understood to refer to a response to something that is perceived in the object of emotion/affection/passion. If I feel fear, it is because I perceive that some person, object, or event threatens my wellbeing or the wellbeing of someone or something about which I care. My fear is a response to this perceived reality. And this is how emotions generally work. Humans delight in beautiful paintings. They have strong feelings of approval or attachment for highly valued persons such as loyal family members or close friends. They sexually desire people whom they consider physically attractive. These

positive affections/emotions/passions are generally associated with *storgē*, *éros* or *philia*. In Lewis' terms, they are natural loves. For Luther, they are a manifestation of the human love that "comes into being through that which is pleasing to it." But, if so, the question remains: What relationship do such feelings have to *agape*, the divine love displayed by the cross of Christ that provides the cornerstone of Christian ethics?

To answer this question requires revisiting the theme of God's love for sinners. As discussed above, the paradigm for *agape* is expressed in Romans 5:8: "God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." Two verses later, Paul further elaborates this point by stating, "while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son" (Rom. 5:10). The cross displays God's love for enemies, for sinners, for the ungodly (Rom. 4:4-5) who have become thoroughgoing participants in the world's evil (Rom. 3:10-18). In many similar passages, the New Testament repeatedly emphasizes that God's love for sinners is not based upon any merit on their part. On the contrary, if humans received from God what they deserve for their moral state, then all of humanity would face divine judgment. God's love goes before all human merit. This is the burden of the anti-Pelagian Canons of the Second Council of Orange, cited above, which take pains to make clear that God's grace precedes and enables the first act of a sinner to repent and will the good. For example, Canon 6 of this council rejects the teaching of anyone who "says that God has mercy upon us when, apart from his grace, we believe, will, desire, strive, labor, pray, watch, study, seek, ask, or knock, but does not confess that it is by the infusion and inspiration of the Holy Spirit within us that we have the faith, the will, or the strength to do all these things as we ought." Likewise, the burden of Martin Luther's Heidelberg

Disputation is to argue that in humanity's fallen state no human "good works" are sufficient to earn divine favor; rather, God's grace and love are freely poured out upon the undeserving. Both the Second Council of Orange and the Heidelberg Disputation are polemics directed against the claim that God's love is a response to the righteousness of humans.

However, this denial of human righteousness is not a denial of all human value and worth. As I argue in the first chapter of this dissertation, Christian scripture and the theological tradition both consistently teach that sin's pervasive effects have not utterly eradicated the *imago Dei*, which remains the essence of humanity. This is why the Psalmists can confess, "I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me" (Ps. 51:5), while also praying to God, "you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made" (Ps. 139:13-14).

It is worth taking up again some important reflections of John Calvin on the connection between Christianity teaching about human nature and its ethical imperative to love one's enemies. In his pastoral treatise, *The Golden Booklet of the True Christian Life*, Calvin writes: "The Lord enjoins us to do good to all without exception, though the greater part, if estimated by their own merit, are most unworthy of it" (33). Here is a hardnosed realism about humanity's moral corruption, combined with an assertion that Christians are to imitate God by doing good works of love to all, irrespective of their merits. But Calvin continues: "Scripture subjoins a most excellent reason, when it tells us that we are not to look to what men in themselves deserve but to attend to the image of God, which exists in all, and to which we owe all honour and love" (33). Even in the

midst of humanity's moral depravity, Calvin argues, humans remain image bearers of God, which means that human nature is intrinsically valuable, worthy of honor and love. This is not a matter of personal merit, but of the intrinsic worth of humanness as such.

To this should be added the point that humans—even in their most depraved state—are capable of redemption. To put this another way: though God's image in humanity may be particularly marred in certain instances (say, the most vicious members of the Klu Klux Klan or the most calloused guards at Auschwitz), it is still possible that the beauty and dignity of the divine image may be restored by God's grace. Indeed, this is precisely what Canon 12 of the Council of Orange claims to be the motivation of divine love: "God loves us for what we shall be by his gift, and not by our own deserving." To say that God "loves us for what we shall be by his gift" is to say that God's love for humans is motivated (at least in part) by God's knowledge of the restored *imago Dei* in those whom he will redeem by grace.

Thus, Anders Nygren's argument that *agape* (value-creating love) and *éros* (value-perceiving love) are radically opposed to one another appears to need some nuancing. Humans are fallen, sinful, and undeserving of God's kindness, which he freely bestows upon them through gratuitous love, but this is not inconsistent with valuing the (badly marred) essence of humanity—the *imago Dei*—or the vision of what restored human personhood shall be. And, when humans imitate God by loving their enemies, this is a free and gratuitous love insofar as it is not conditional upon any particular merits of the beloved individuals as such. However, this love may be motivated in part by a perception of the inherent value and dignity of God's image in

the beloved enemy, combined with the knowledge that this person could be redeemed in a way that would bring to fruition new and glorious qualities that are not currently present.

I suggest that one aspect of what it means to love is learning a new way of seeing and valuing human persons in the light of the gospel of Jesus Christ. This is likely part of what Paul aims to communicate in 2 Corinthians 5:14-16, where he writes:

For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised. From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer.

Here Paul describes Christian discipleship as a life that is controlled by “the love of Christ.” Paul’s love of humans is driven by the love of Jesus for his people. Because “he died” for them, they now respond by reciprocal self-giving, living not “for themselves but for him.” This new life of self-giving love for Christ produces a new way of regarding other people. With the phrase, “From now on, therefore,” Paul suggests that the new relationship with Christ is Christians’ basis for not regarding other persons “according to the flesh,” as they “once regarded Christ.” But what does it mean to regard a person according to the flesh? Most biblical commentators agree that Paul refers to the practice of evaluating people according to the external criteria by which humans generally assess one another’s relative value. Compelled by the love of Christ, this is no longer the way that Christians ought to see people. Then what is the alternative way of seeing others? I suggest that it is valuing people not according to how well they live up to various cultural criteria of human worth, but rather as they are—or could be—in Christ. In the case of those in whom one already perceives the beauty of Christlikeness, this would mean delighting in these qualities for Christ’s sake and

desiring the even fuller flourishing of this human being in the image of God. For those in whom one can see only (or primarily) the corrupting presence of sin (enemies, oppressors, those who perpetrate injustice), this would mean seeing the latent image of God in them—their buried human potential—which is capable of coming to fruition through the redeeming grace of God in Christ. Moreover, if love begins with internal motivation, as the New Testament teaches, then benevolent actions driven by a sincere valuing of the beloved individual—seeing them not “according to the flesh” but according to the possibilities of their redemption in Christ—lies at the core of what love means.

If my argument is correct, then a major point of contention in the history of philosophies of love—whether *agape* appraises or bestows value—is based on a false dichotomy. Many theologians and philosophers have held that love includes a particular way of valuing a person, but there are sharp disagreements about what this means. Bennet Helm rightly points out that *eros* and *agape* are often portrayed as two diametrically opposed manners of valuing others. As Helm puts it, *eros* “values the beloved because she is valuable,” but *agape* causes the beloved to become valuable because she is loved. The former appraises value and the latter bestows value. At the heart of Nygren’s argument is the conviction that because Christian love is gratuitous and value-bestowing, it cannot be conceived in any way as value-appraising. It seems to me that this belief is false. There is nothing contradictory about saying that *agape* appraises human persons as intrinsically valuable—reckoning the marred-but-not-eradicated *imago Dei* as something of great worth—and that it does so despite the fact that the moral state of fallen humans renders them deserving of judgment rather than

kindness. On this view, *agape* is gratuitous and value-bestowing in the sense that it pursues the wellbeing of those who deserve retributive judgment and, by so doing, makes possible a change in them that would make them deserve better than they currently do. But it is also value-appraising in the sense that it does not think fallen and yet-unrepentant persons are thus worthless. This is why there is no inconsistency between Calvin stating that “the greater part [of humanity], if estimated by their own merit, are most unworthy of” love, while also asserting that “we are not to look to what men in themselves deserve but to attend to the image of God, which exists in all, and to which we owe all honour and love” (33).⁶⁸ Likewise, there is no inconsistency between the recurrent New Testament teaching that all humanity has sinned and thus merited divine judgment and Jesus’s teaching that God considers humans valuable above all creation even in their fallen state (Matt. 10:31; Lk. 12:6-7).

Augustine makes this point eloquently in his *Tractates on the Gospel of John*. In this text, he takes up the question of how Jesus can teach his disciples simultaneously not to love “the world”—by which he means the evil tendencies of the present world order—while teaching them to love their enemies, who embody these tendencies.

Augustine claims that, in its fallen state, “the world loves its faults and hates its nature” (87.4). Christians, however, are to do the opposite. Disciples of Jesus ought to hate the

⁶⁸ In his *Commentary on a Harmony of the Gospels Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, Calvin similarly remarks about Jesus’s command to love enemies:

To keep up the exercise of brotherly love, God assures us, that all men are our brethren, because they are related to us by a common nature. Whenever I see a man, I must, of necessity, behold myself as in a mirror: for he is my bone and my flesh, (Genesis 29:14.) Now, though the greater part of men break off, in most instances, from this holy society, yet their depravity does not violate the order of nature; for we ought to regard God as the author of the union.

Here, Calvin makes familial union through a shared human nature the basis for love and argues that the “depravity” of human sinfulness does not change the order of nature. Since “human nature” and “the image of God” are synonymous for Calvin, this text provides another instance of him arguing that the value for God’s image in one’s neighbors should motivate love even if their personal attitudes, actions, etc. do not merit it.

sins of their enemies, but love the image of God in them. In Augustine's words: "We are prohibited from loving the fault in [the world] and are commanded to love its nature" (87.4). Insofar as *agape* values people despite their faults and wills the good for those who have merited judgment, it is utterly gratuitous. But insofar as it loves the image of God in every human person, it is value-appraising; indeed, it is *éros*. For the image of God is beautiful, and the Christian knows that even where this beauty seems utterly hidden, it is present, and it can be restored by God's grace.

4.9. Enemies and the Practice of Love

At this point, it would be helpful to step back and consider the practical outworking of these ideas on love, value, and emotion in the lives of persons who have suffered terrible injustices. To this end, it is worth turning again to the struggle of black Christians facing vicious racism—often from whites who likewise professed to be Christians—in the midst of the Civil Rights movement. In his pulpit, Martin Luther King Jr. wrestled with what it means to value the human dignity of enemies: racists who continually caused great suffering for himself, his family, and the people of his church. For King, this was not an abstract question, but a pressing existential and pastoral problem. In a sermon titled "Love Your Enemies," in which he speaks openly and honestly to his black congregation about the difficulty of loving white racists, King grapples out loud with the challenge of Christ's teaching on this point. He reminds his congregation that "the evil deed of the enemy-neighbor, the thing that hurts us, never quite expresses all that he is" (45). After quoting Paul and Plato to the effect that a battle between good and evil rages within every human person, King urges his

congregation to look closely at their enemies in the light of this reality, to consider their human motivations and whatever personal goodness may lie hidden beneath their evil acts. He then proclaims from personal experience that this spiritual exercise creates a capacity to see the enemy in a new light. “We recognize that his hate grows out of fear, pride, ignorance, prejudice, and misunderstanding,” King declares, “but in spite of this, we know God’s image is ineffably etched in his being. We love our enemies by realizing that they are not totally bad and that they are not beyond the reach of God’s redemptive love” (45-46). Three points are notable here. First, King claims that God’s image—the “something more” that lies beneath enemies’ evil actions—is “ineffably etched” in the their “being.” This is a statement about the essential ontology of human persons. And by calling the image of God “ineffable,” King makes it clear that this appraisal is based not on any perceptible and articulable good qualities that the enemy possesses, but on simple faith in the biblical doctrine of humanity. Second, King states that love for enemies is motivated not only by their essential dignity as God’s image bearers, but also by the possibility of their redemption through God’s love. They are loved for what they could become by grace. Third, King’s call to universally love all people based on their essential nature and the possibility of their redemption is balanced by an attention to the particularity of individual enemies, including the psychology behind their hateful actions. He exhorts his congregation to attend to the human emotions and motivations—“fear, pride, ignorance, prejudice, and misunderstanding”—that drive the particular enemies with whom they have to deal. Love for all people is to be expressed in a way that includes attention to the good and bad realities of the specific persons who happen to be one’s actual neighbors.

Though King speaks of valuing the essential and potential glory of human persons, he does not equate this with any particular emotional state. On the contrary, he emphasizes the necessity of choosing to act for the good of others even against one's emotional inclinations. Somewhat later in this same sermon on loving enemies, King makes this point clearly:

Now we can see what Jesus meant when he said, "Love your enemies." We should be happy that he did not say, "Like your enemies." It is almost impossible to like some people. "Like" is a sentimental and affectionate word. How can we be affectionate toward a person whose avowed aim is to crush our very being and place innumerable stumbling blocks in our path? How can we like a person who is threatening our children and bombing our homes? That is impossible. But Jesus recognized that *love* is greater than *like*. When Jesus bids us to love our enemies, he is speaking neither of *eros* nor *philia*; he is speaking of *agape*, understanding and creative, redemptive goodwill for all men. Only by following this way and responding with this type of love are we able to be children of our Father who is in heaven. (46-47)

This contrast of *agape* with *eros* and *philia* is the first mention of these Greek terms in this sermon, but King's congregants were accustomed to an oft-repeated peroration in which he summarized their meaning (under the influence of Anders Nygren).⁶⁹ Clearly, for King, valuing humans leads to willing the good for them. However, this "understanding and creative, redemptive goodwill" does not imply any "sentimental" or "affectionate" emotional state. With a pastorally sensitive rhetorical move, King's rhetorical questions lead to a declaration of the impossibility of "liking" the racists who have been terrorizing his congregants and their families. They don't have to like such people, but they also don't have to succumb to fear, rage, or hatred. They can choose

⁶⁹ King interacts with Nygren's *Agape and Eros* in two of his seminary papers—"A View of the Cross Possessing Biblical and Spiritual Justification" and "Contemporary Continental Theology"—which have been published online by the "King Papers" project at Stanford University. Though King occasionally cites C.S. Lewis's *Answers to Questions on Christianity* in his sermons, I am not aware of any evidence that he had exposure to *The Four Loves*, which was not published until 1960.

instead to value these people and will the good for them in a way that continues to resist their evil actions.

In my judgment, King's moral and pastoral instincts are exemplary here. He clearly rejects any banal sentimentality that would call people to have feelings of affection for the individuals who are bombing their churches, lynching their neighbors, and fighting fiercely to deny their rights. But he does urge people to a new way of seeing and relating to their enemies that is rooted in the Christian doctrines of creation, sin, and grace. These enemies are to be valued because they are made in God's image and because they are potentially redeemable, but this valuing is not a denial of the fact that such people's behaviors, words, and attitudes certainly do not *deserve* love.

Enemies who persist in evil are to be valued as redeemable human persons despite the fact that their actions merit retaliation and judgment. For Christian believers, such valuation is based also on the conviction that this is precisely how God has treated us: valuing us, pursuing our redemption, withholding well-deserved judgment out of sheer grace.

However, I am not convinced that *agape* is totally disconnected from the affections, as King's powerful sermon seems to imply. After all, positive emotions such as cherishing, delighting, or showing compassion are generally considered to be the affective responses to various kinds of perceived value. Examining my own experience, it seems intuitive that if I love (with *agape*) persons who have not perpetrated evil acts against me, a complete absence of any positive affective orientation towards such persons would indicate that I do not yet value them to as high of a degree as I ought. It seems that *agape* should lead me towards an ever-deepening appreciation of their good

qualities, which would normally bring about some positive emotional response. In the case of enemies—those who persist in a pattern of treating me unjustly—it seems again that if I thoroughly value their essential human dignity, desire to see their humanity more fully flourishing through God’s redeeming grace, and seek to understand their particular experiences and motivations, I should—at minimum—be moved with compassion for the sad moral and psychological state that they are in. If these intuitions are correct, then it may be that my failure to respond with any positive affect to these persons is one more indication (among many) that I am not yet anywhere close to fully embodying the *agape* of Christ, which is my Christian aspiration. In such a situation, I suspect that it would be of little help—and perhaps it would even be counterproductive—to attempt directly to affect my emotional state towards the persons whom I would like to love more fully. Instead, I would almost certainly be wiser to follow the council of Aquinas and Kierkegaard by focusing my energy on continually choosing to act in a way that brings good to them, with prayers that God will graciously bring my affective inclinations into line with the dictates of love.

In short, then, it seems to me that *agape* involves not only actions that benefit others, but also actions that are motivated by a desire to benefit others for their good because they are valued as human persons. This value is not based upon any estimate of their relative human merits (moral, intellectual, aesthetic, or otherwise), but rather upon the conviction that they possess inherent dignity as image bearers of God, and—whatever their current state—they are capable of being redeemed by God’s grace. In a perfect state, such love for others would probably manifest itself in some affectionate manner, at least in the form of heartfelt compassion. Indeed, perfect human *agape*

would probably be manifest in finding one's own joy in the wellbeing of the other, even if this means enduring suffering or death for the other's good. But the existential business of loving involves choosing to act according to the dictates of love, even if one's emotions have not caught up with one's highest moral ideals.

And this brings me to an essential point: According to several major thinkers in the Christian tradition, love takes practice. The birth of *agape* in the human soul is an aspect of regeneration, a gift of God's grace (1 Jn. 4:7). To trust God is already to receive from God's Spirit a new capacity to love, to value people as God values them, and to act sacrificially for their good. But this capacity may and must be cultivated. As Kierkegaard nicely puts it: "Love, to be sure, proceeds from the heart, but let us not in our haste about this forget the eternal truth that love forms the heart" (29). In particular instances, Christians may feel no inclination to act in love—they may, on the contrary, desire to defeat and humiliate their enemies—but they can still make the decision to act in love. For Kierkegaard, taking responsibility for this decision to act is crucial, and the decision itself has a capacity to change the person who makes it. This decision to act in accordance with the dictates of love "forms the heart" of the one who makes it, so that desires and affections may over time come into alignment with the truth that guides action.⁷⁰ This, also, is the argument of Thomas Aquinas, for whom love is one of the "theological virtues" infused only by special grace. Aquinas argues, nonetheless, that the Christian must choose to act in cooperation with this graciously bestowed capacity, and that such choices change the character of the one who makes them. To do the acts of love without any desire to do so is morally inferior to doing these acts joyfully and

⁷⁰ For an excellent analysis of Kierkegaard's philosophy of love, see M. Jamie Ferreira, *Love's Grateful Striving: A Commentary on Kierkegaard's Works of Love*.

spontaneously, but it is also superior to not doing them at all. Moreover, the decision to act lovingly, even against one's inclinations, has the power to change the inclinations. For Aquinas, a virtue is a habitual good action, and habit is a "kind of second nature."⁷¹ Those who choose to do good for others—time and again, without bothering much about their own psychological state while doing so—are the persons who will become freely, spontaneously, and joyfully loving. The affections follow actions. Practicing love forms the heart.

4.10. Forgiveness, Enemy-Love, and Justice

In my preceding analysis of love's critics, it became apparent that the most controversial aspect of Christian *agape* is Christ's command to love one's enemies. Skeptics believe that doing so would perpetuate injustice or render political struggle impotent. This concern becomes especially acute in relation to the theme of forgiveness, which is closely related to love for enemies. In order to respond to love's critics, it is necessary to develop an account of forgiveness that is compatible with a strong resistance to evil and commitment to justice. To begin developing such an account, I turn first to the question of whether forgiveness should be thought of as conditional, which is a central issue in ongoing philosophical debates about this topic.

Jacques Derrida takes up this question about conditions in his essay "On Forgiveness." He begins the essay by acknowledging the importance of forgiveness in a world in which no one is innocent, and then states that the main resources for thinking about forgiveness are in the heritage of Abrahamic faiths, especially Christianity. This

⁷¹ The best way of entry into Aquinas' thought on virtue is the volume *Disputed Questions on Virtue*, edited by Jeffrey Hause and Claudia Eisen Murphy, which includes helpfully annotated texts such as "On the Virtues in General" and "On Charity."

leads Derrida to identify what he considers the great tension within the structure of forgiveness according to this heritage:

It is important to analyze at its base the tension at the heart of the heritage between, *on the one side*, the idea which is also a demand for the *unconditional*, gracious, infinite, aneconomic forgiveness granted *to the guilty as guilty*, without counterpart, even to those who do not repent or ask forgiveness, and *on the other side*, . . . a conditional forgiveness proportionate to the recognition of the fault, to repentance, to the transformation of the sinner who then explicitly asks forgiveness. (34-35, italics original)

Though I believe that this sentence betrays a confusion that is likewise manifest in the writings of some major theologians, Derrida correctly identifies the key problem of conditions (or the lack thereof) within the structure of forgiveness. There is no consensus among philosophers or theologians about the best way to resolve this tension, and the implications of this debate are substantial.

As a starting point for exploring this problem of forgiveness and its conditions, a brief consideration of Charles L. Griswold's influential book *Forgiveness: A Philosophical Exploration* is illuminating. Griswold—whose project is to establish an analytic philosophy of forgiveness on purely secular grounds—sets up his position as a contrast with that of Eve Garrard and David McNaughton, who defend the view that forgiveness is unconditional. Garrard and McNaughton build their work on a commitment to human solidarity and claim “to forgive involves not requiring either apology or penance. To insist on an apology is to insist that the wrong-doer humble himself before one, and this implies that there is still some residual resentment” (47). Griswold, on the contrary, maintains that the necessity of viewing oneself, on principle, as a person of dignity—“one-not-to-be-treated-in-this-manner” (65)—makes resentment an appropriate emotion, and victims have every reason to refuse giving up this emotion until offending parties give them a reason to do so. Thus, Griswold argues, forgiveness

cannot be offered without the condition of apology. From my theological perspective, both sides of this argument are incorrect.

The conditions of forgiveness are not criteria that offenders must meet before the offended party is willing to offer forgiveness; rather, the conditions depend entirely on the structure of forgiveness itself. Forgiveness in Christian scripture is not merely a removal of the offended party's "hard feelings" or of the offender's "guilt" in an abstract sense. On the contrary, forgiveness is consummated in the restoration of a relationship characterized by peace. Its ultimate end is reconciliation, which establishes what Martin Luther King Jr. called "the beloved community." Herein lie the radicalism and the great difficulty of forgiveness. It looks at an enemy and offers something more and other than the removal of some consequence for violating an abstract justice. The offer of forgiveness looks at an enemy and says: "You have wronged me. You have done evil not in the abstract, but against me. And yet, I choose not to hate you. I desire good for you, and I offer you the possibility of restored relationship if you should choose to repent." This offer of forgiveness is modeled upon God's offer of forgiveness through his act of grace and judgment on the cross. The offer does not depend upon any merit in the offender. In this Christian sense, it is an expression of love for enemies that is prevenient and unconditional. This initial, loving act of offering forgiveness after an offense, however, is not an act of affirmation or acceptance. Love exposes the evil of the deed done, brings injustice to the surface, and demands repentance before reconciliation is possible. "Forgiveness" in Christian theology names not only the *offer* of restored relationship—which is an aspect of love for one's enemy—but also the *realization* of this relationship. Not until the enemies cease to be enemies and are

reconciled to one another has forgiveness been consummated. And the consummation of forgiveness in the embrace of peaceful relations is conditional upon the offending party's willingness to repent.

This point is illustrated by two key texts in which Jesus instructs his disciples about how to deal with grievances in the Christian community. The first of these is Luke 17:3-4, in which Jesus says, "Pay attention to yourselves! If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him, and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' you must forgive him." Notably, Jesus does not say, "If your brother sins, forgive him." The first act of love in response to an offense is not forgiveness but rebuke. Though this may sound strange to some modern ears, for which "love" has come to mean something like unconditional affirmation, it is deeply rooted in the wisdom literature of the Hebrew scriptures (see Prov. 27:5-6). True love is deeply committed to justice, which is why it begins by exposing and confronting the evil. Until this evil is removed, a relationship of *shalom* is not possible. For the offended party to grant full forgiveness and a restored relationship without confronting the evil that has been committed would be to approve a false and unjust peace.⁷² The rebuke is therefore necessary, but the purpose of the rebuke is to call for repentance, in which case the relationship is restored. And if the sinning brother sins again, the process is continually repeated. A steadfast commitment to justice is matched by a steadfast commitment to reconciliation. No relationship of peace can be reestablished until there has been repentance, for this would perpetuate unjust relations.

⁷² In *The City of God*, Augustine offers a very provocative critique of the exercise of power by citizens of the earthly city by first arguing that all social (and antisocial) action is motivated by the desire for some form of peace and then contrasting "just peace" from "unjust peace" (XIX.12).

But the offended party, in a spirit of love, confronts the offending party again and again, exposing sin in a spirit of grace, offering restored relationship.

A similar dynamic is apparent in another text in which Jesus instructs his disciples about accountability and reconciliation within the Christian community. In Matthew 18:15-17, Jesus states:

If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

Once again, this text demonstrates a steadfast commitment to justice that is matched by an equally steadfast commitment to reconciliation. “When a brother sins against you,” the first step is confrontation with an aim at restoration. “If he listens to you” here surely means something like, “if he admits his fault and repents.” The statement “you have gained your brother” describes reconciliation and is parallel to the phrase “forgive him” in Luke 17:3. In this text, Jesus gives further instruction about what to do if the offending party is unrepentant. Rather than giving up on the relationship—or giving in to a continued relationship in which the injustice remains unaddressed—Jesus tells his disciples to enlist other members of the community to assist by mediating the reconciliation process. This progresses through multiple stages, each with the goal of reestablishing the relationship on the terms of just peace, until a final stage in which the unrepentant offender is excluded from the community. Here, the strictest standards of accountability and justice are clearly in place, and the whole community is involved in maintaining these standards. If the offending party eventually repents, he will be restored (cf. 2 Cor. 2:5-11).

This basic approach to thinking about justice and reconciliation is apparent in the practices of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) as well as Miroslav Volf's landmark text *Exclusion and Embrace*. The "T" in TRC means that the first step to reconciliation is confrontation. In the aftermath of apartheid, those who had committed crimes were offered the possibility of pardon only after they confronted their victims and made a full confession. But the "R" in TRC means that the confessing and repenting perpetrator has the possibility of a future place in human society. Similarly, the "embrace" in Volf's formula is an unconditional will-to-embrace, which longs to be realized in the actual "embrace" of restored relationship. But this cannot happen so long as injustice persists, which is the meaning of "exclusion." An unconditional love for one's enemies leads to a confrontation of evil, with the ultimate aim of repentance and reconciliation.

It seems clear, however, that in certain cases there is no possibility of a completely restored relationship. For example, in situations of rape or severe abuse, complete reconciliation might be damaging for one or both parties. Indeed, in such cases, it may even be the case that face-to-face confrontation would be traumatizing. Moreover, it will often be the case that a repentant party will still have to face consequences beyond restitution for the offence committed. For example, those who have sexually abused children should certainly face permanent consequences that restrain their access to minors, both for the protection of the innocent and for their own sake. In these extreme situations, it is helpful to think of reconciliation within an eschatological framework. Christians believe that the complete reconciliation of all things will take place at the consummation of God's kingdom (Eph. 1:9-10; Rev. 21:1-

8), and that this future even has already broken into the present through the gift of the Spirit (Eph. 1:13-14). This means, on one hand, that all acts of forgiveness are a coming near of the kingdom of God, and, on the other hand, that all such acts are partial until this kingdom has come in its fullness. In fact, forgiveness and reconciliation are probably better described as processes than events. Forgiveness begins with the decision to will the good for one's enemy and is consummated in the final reconciliation in which all wounds are healed. In cases where complete restoration of relationship is not possible, the important thing is to be willing and acting in the right direction. And the right direction is love.

This analysis of the Christian practice of forgiveness allows me to return to some of the most important criticisms of Christian love that have been advanced. Badiou reasons that loving enemies is inimical to the political necessity of resisting them. Malcolm X argues that nonviolent love in response to violent oppression enables the perpetuation of the unjust status quo. Both of these criticisms share a concern that Christian talk about enemy-love and forgiveness function ideologically as a way of shoring up oppressive power and fending off resistance. And, in fact, such language is often misappropriated for just such an end.

To illustrate this point it is helpful to contrast two highly publicized responses of black Americans to recent incidents of racial injustice, and the way that these responses were perceived by many in the white community. The first instance involves Dylann Roof, a white supremacist who murdered nine African Americans in cold blood at a prayer service of Emmanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charlotte, North Carolina, on June 17, 2015. Roof said his goal was to start a race war. During the trial,

several family members of his victims publicly confronted Roof, expressing their anger and grief, but also offering forgiveness and mercy. Nadine Collier, whose 70-year-old mother Ethel Lance was among those murdered, said to Roof: “You took something very precious from me. I will never talk to her again. I will never, ever hold her again. But I forgive you. And have mercy on your soul” (Berman). The sister of DePayne Middleton-Doctor said: “I acknowledge that I am very angry. But one thing that DePayne always enjoined in our family . . . is she taught me that we are the family that love built. We have no room for hating, so we have to forgive. I pray God on your soul” (Berman). Wanda Simmons, the granddaughter of Daniel Simmons, another of Roof’s victims, said the response of family members was proof that “hate won’t win” (Berman). In the weeks following these highly publicized statements, the grieving family members who made them were widely discussed as examples of the incredible power of love and forgiveness to triumph over the most cruel expression of hate.

A less favorable public reaction was experienced by African American protestors, who—in response to a series of racial incidents in Ferguson, Missouri—carried signs bearing the slogan “No justice; no peace!” The sentiments of many white conservatives were expressed in an *Washington Times* opinion column by Ernest Istook, a former member of the U.S. House of Representatives from Oklahoma’s fifth congressional district, which is where I live. Istook blames “the media” and “black leaders” for fanning racial unrest. He accuses political leaders of using the event to try boosting “minority turnout” for an upcoming election (which he seems to consider problematic). He lambasts “agitators” for continuing “to claim black Americans are victims of too much policing, too many arrests and too much incarceration.” He does

everything except face the realities of racial injustice in Ferguson. And then he concludes his column with a choice bit of racial fear mongering: “‘No justice; No peace!’ isn’t simply a slogan; it’s actually a threat. Translated, it means, ‘We want revenge!’ that will be extracted against anyone who doesn’t bow to the protestors’ demands.” In short, he wants his interpreters to fear and distrust black protestors, and to see their slogan as a threat of violence towards the innocent, rather than a denunciation of false peace that perpetuates injustice.

The point of telling these two stories is that the majority culture in the United States tends to approve of Christian love when it expresses forgiveness towards a racist terrorist, but to disapprove those who demand change of an unjust status quo. A Christian political praxis of love must avoid, at all costs, the trap of pandering to such a culture. Christian love, as I have argued, confronts evil directly and demands repentance. It freely offers forgiveness and reconciliation, but only on the terms of justice. Thus, Christians should learn from the courageous and resilient love expressed by the family of Dylann Roof’s victims, but they should understand that protests against oppression are part of the same Christian impulse. A robust theology of love and forgiveness will motivate actions that bring latent tensions to the surface, call false peace what it is, and force a culture marked by structural injustice to face its sins. Only love that powerfully confronts unjust power can form the basis for a redemptive Christian political praxis.

4.11. The Church as a Community of Love

The church of Jesus Christ is a community of love. It is created by the electing, calling, justifying, adopting, sanctifying love of God in Christ and through the Spirit. According to Paul, this same Spirit “pours out” God’s love into the hearts of individual Christians (Rom. 5:5) and strengthens them to progressively understand, trust, depend upon, and draw strength from this love (Eph. 3:14-19). The experience of knowing and believing in God’s love calls forth a response. Christian conversion and the ongoing process of spiritual transformation must be understood as a fundamental reorientation of the self towards God and others. The content of this reorientation can be summarized by the word “love. “ Christians’ common life together as church is a training ground, a formative community—structured by the story of God’s love—in which acts of love may be modeled, imitated, and practiced. When the life of the church is healthy, its internal relations become a paradigm of beloved community, an outpost of the kingdom of heaven, in which reconciliation and mutual care are embodied and displayed. But the love *ad intra* wherein the members of the church care for one another is designed by God to erupt as love *ad extra*. In this respect, Christian community performs and participates in the reality that God is love, for the eternal, triune dance is revealed to the church precisely in the gratuitous creating and redeeming acts of the Father, Son, and Spirit in history. As a community of love, the church is not only a paradigm of mutual care, but an agent of God’s evil-resisting, creation-restoring, shalom-cultivating power in the world.

To unpack what it means for the church to be a community of love that participates in the redemptive mission of God requires making distinctions between the church as universal and local, triumphant and militant, visible and invisible. The “one holy catholic and apostolic church” of which the Nicene Creed speaks consists not only of all those humans—past, present, and future—who are redeemed by God’s grace in Christ, but also the elect angels, with whom redeemed humanity will be reconciled in the consummated kingdom of God. But the one church is manifest in local churches, concrete communities of disciples, embedded in particular times and places where the ideal of universal love can be concretely realized. The ideal of the universal church is only credible if it can be embodied—however partially and imperfectly—within the contingencies of history. Moreover, to speak of the church-in-history is to speak of what theologians call the “church militant.” Whereas those who have died in God’s grace already participant in the triumph of divine peace over evil, the church on earth is always an embattled church, struggling with the brokenness not only of the world, but also of itself and all its members. Because of this brokenness, there are many people of God—those who have been justified by divine grace and are thus members of the “invisible church”—who nonetheless remain outside the church’s visible fellowship for various reasons. Meanwhile many who participate in the “visible church”—including some in highest levels of leadership, often endowed with honors—may be devoid of divine grace, those whom Jesus called “sheep in wolves clothing” (Matt. 7:15). In the parable of the wheat and tares, however, Christ tells his disciples not to attempt sorting out the authentic and inauthentic members of the church, which would inevitably be destructive, but to patiently await the unerring judgment and grace of God (Matt. 13:24-

30). During this time of waiting, it is the visible, militant, local churches that provide the Christian's context of spiritual life and mission. Within these concrete communities—beleaguered by sin and error, limping from a history of schism and violence, continually failing and repenting—Christians must find a way to embody God's love and pursue God's peace.

In the Protestant tradition, a local church has been widely understood as a community defined by the presence of word and sacrament.⁷³ The word that forms the common life of these churches is the Old and New Testaments of Christian scripture, and—most fundamentally—the person of Jesus Christ to whom the scriptures bear witness, God's incarnate Word. The word of God is present not only in the preaching ministry of ordained ministers, but also in every aspect of the church's communal life. It is present in hymns and prayers, in the recitation of creeds, and in encouragements, instructions, counsels, and corrections that ordinary Christians give to one another on a daily basis. Paul exhorts the church at Colossae to let every aspect of its common life be shaped by this mutual ministry: "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God" (Col. 3:16). The Greek term rendered "you" in this text is plural, and the phrase "teaching and admonishing one another" makes it clear that the ministry of the word is meant to be mutual (rather than unidirectional) and to include every member of the community (rather than being limited to ordained leaders). Not only is the content of this word the revelation of God's love in Christ, but the motivation, manner, and goal of word-ministry is also love.

⁷³ For a concise and carefully nuanced introduction to Reformation theologies of the church from a highly competent historian of reformation theology, see Robert Kolb, "The Church."

Again, Paul makes this point clear in his epistle to the Ephesians: “speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love” (Eph. 4:16-17). The preaching, singing, praying, encouraging, correcting, instructing, comforting words of the church are designed to cultivate a community that embodies the love of Jesus.

The word of Christ in the church is also tangibly expressed in the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper.⁷⁴ In baptism, the Christian publicly expresses repentance from sin and the faith in the promise of Jesus Christ, thus visibly expressing the believer’s entry into communion with the triune God and the community of Christ’s disciples. The New Testament associates the act of baptism with a variety of images, including the cleansing of sin, but the most prominent image is that of death and resurrection with Christ. As Paul puts it: “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life” (Rom. 6:3-4). To receive Christian baptism is to die with Christ. It is to die to sin, to the exaltation of self over all other goods, to the abuse of human freedom and autonomy that leads God’s image bearers to destroy themselves and one another. This death is also a rising with Christ to new life, empowered by the Spirit, oriented in love towards God and one’s neighbors.

⁷⁴ Some in my own Baptist tradition reject the term “sacraments” in favor of terms such as “ordinances.” For a highly sophisticated defense of this rejection of sacramental terminology as applied to baptism, see Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics, IV.4*, 102-108. I employ the term here simply because it is widely used in the majority of Protestant churches.

The cross of Jesus is the fullest manifestation of God's eternal love in history, and the baptismal act of publicly dying and rising with Christ—the initial act of Christian faith, obedience, confession, and discipleship—is an identification with the God of Jesus Christ and his community of love.

As the word of Christ is present in the sacrament of baptism, which is the means of entering full participation in the visible church, so also this word is present in the continually repeated act of the Lord's Supper. In this practice the church remembers Christ's self-giving love on the cross (Lk. 22:19; 1 Cor. 11:24), enacts its present unity as a diverse people reconciled to God and one another by Christ (1 Cor. 10:16-17), and looks forward to the consummation of this reconciliation in "the marriage supper of the Lamb" (Lk. 22:16, 18; Rev. 19:6-9). In the Lord's Supper, Christ is present and active both as host and as meal (Vanhoozer 162). The church, also, is active: visibly and publicly confessing its total dependence on the grace of Jesus. Because the church confesses that its covenantal union with God is based solely upon God's justifying grace, which is received afresh each time it comes to the communion table, it also confesses that this grace is the only basis for Christian fellowship. Ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, political affiliation, and every other boundary to human solidarity become secondary to Christians' shared identity as the forgiven people of God in Christ. Every member of the church confesses with Paul: "Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread" (1 Cor. 10:17). The Lord's Supper makes visible again and again the new covenant of grace that binds the Christian community together in love.

Now these practices of word ministry, baptism, and the Lord's Supper are marks of the visible church in its local manifestations, but they do not comprise the identity of the church, nor do they exhaust its mission. As for its identity, the church is God's new humanity in Christ, the assembly of those justified and sanctified by divine grace, the community of the Holy Spirit. This new society is called into being and nurtured by God through his word. In its practices of baptism and the Lord's Supper, it responds to the word of God in obedient faith, and thus receives from God both guidance and strength. These acts are the means whereby the whole church nurtures and forms its members in the power of the Spirit. But the community thus formed does not exist for itself. It exists for God and for the world. It is a community of worship and of mission. The church is apostolic not only in the sense that it is founded upon the witness of the apostles to the death and resurrection of Christ, but also in the sense that it is a *sent* community.

Jesus describes the missionary nature of the church in the Sermon on the Mount. After pronouncing God's blessings upon those who are poor in spirit, who mourn for the world's brokenness, who are meek, who hunger and thirst for righteousness, who are merciful, whose hearts are pure, who pursue peace, and who experience persecution for righteousness's sake (Matt. 5:1-10), Jesus declares to his disciples:

You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet. You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven. (Matt. 5:13-16)

In the Near East during the first century, salt was used primarily as a preservative. As "the salt of the earth," the church has been placed in the world to preserve what is good,

holy, just, and true while holding at bay the rotting effects of sin.⁷⁵ Light, in the Christian scriptures, is frequently used as a symbol of God's holiness and wisdom as well as his creative power to drive out the darkness associated with evil and chaos. Jesus states explicitly that the church—as the light of the world—participates in God's illuminating work through “good works.” In the context of the gospel, these are works of love that aim at the flourishing of others. Such works must not be done in order to gain praise for the one doing them (Matt. 6:1-4), but Jesus states that they will be seen by outsiders, who will give glory to God. In other words, the life of the church is a life of public love, a life that demonstrates the nature of divine wisdom to the world as it has been disclosed in Jesus.

This missionary nature of the church is further clarified by the commissions that Jesus gives his apostles at the end of each gospel and the beginning of Acts. Matthew's gospel concludes with the commission of Jesus to go with his authority and the promise of his presence to “make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (28:18-20). In Mark's account, Jesus tells his disciples to “Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation” (16:15). Luke's gospel ends with Jesus telling his disciples to remain in Jerusalem until they are “clothed with power from on high” to be his witnesses to all nations of repentance for the forgiveness of sins on the basis of his death and resurrection (24:44-49), and Acts begins with Jesus' words to these disciples, “you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end

⁷⁵ R.T. France also notes that salt was used in the ancient Near East, as in the modern West for flavoring. If this use is also in view, Christ's metaphor could also mean disciples should provide “flavor” to the world by adding wisdom, love, and other qualities associated with God's kingdom (France 174).

of the earth” (1:8). In these texts, Jesus sends the apostles—and, by extension, the church—to be his agents in the world, carrying out the universal mission that he has begun in the power of the Holy Spirit. John’s version of this commission is both economic and expansive: “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you” (20:21). The Father sent the Son to give his life for the life of the world, to proclaim the glad tidings that the kingdom of heaven has come near, and to demonstrate this nearness with Spirit-empowered works of restorative love. Jesus sends the church to do the same.

The mission of the church as the agent of God’s redeeming love in the world cannot be separated from the church’s calling to embody this love in its own internal fellowship. Jesus teaches quite explicitly that his disciples’ mutual love for one another is the authenticating mark that they are his (Jn. 13:35). The New Testament further teaches that this loving fellowship must transcend every cultural boundary (Gal. 3:28; Col. 3:11), and that it must be manifest not only in spiritual care but in financial sharing that meets the needs of poor members (1 Jn. 3:16-18). The church’s many conspicuous failures in this respect—not least through its unresolved schisms and the continuing segregation of its churches along ethnic and socioeconomic lines in many places—are undoubtedly among the main reasons for its spiritual weakness and faltering influence in some parts of the world. But when the church is faithful to practice its teachings about love within its own fellowship, it gains a power and credibility to participate in God’s redemptive mission. The church that learns to cultivate an active, positive peace in its own fellowship will be well equipped as agent of God’s peace in the world.

4.12. Love and Power

My reflections up to this point have left several questions unanswered that are crucial for the argument of this dissertation. It is clear that love plays a central roll in Christian ethics, but what is the relationship of love to the evil of injustice as it is manifest in human societies? Does Christian mission consist exclusively in proclamation of the gospel, spiritual formation within the churches, and “good works” carried out at the individual, interpersonal level? Or does Christian mission also concern the structure of human cultures? Does love challenge evils that are institutionalized in legal, governmental, and economic structures? If so, how? These questions are, in part, questions about power. How does the discipleship of churches and individual Christians relate to established governmental and economic powers? If these are judged to be corrupt, what power, if any, does the church wield to combat such corruption? In section 4.14, I sketch out some broad biblical paradigms for engaging these questions. But first, it is helpful to pause and take note of some particular ways that ancient theological inquiries regarding love, power, and Christian mission became of central concern during the twentieth century.

It would be instructive to begin by examining an important speech—“Where Do We Go from Here?”—delivered by Martin Luther King Jr. to the annual sessions of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) on August 16, 1967 in Atlanta, Georgia. In the first portion of the speech, King surveys the substantial changes that had been enacted in American society since the inception of SCLS a decade earlier. Drawing the familiar comparison between the African American struggle for freedom and justice and the biblical story of Israel’s exodus, King declares “we have left the

dusty soils of Egypt, and we have crossed a Red Sea,” but—given harsh realities such as ongoing economic and educational inequities—“ we still have a long, long way to go before we reach the promised land.” For King, the question “Where do we go from here?” is not only a matter of naming social problems and developing strategies to redress these problems. It is also a question that requires reexamining the basic moral, philosophical, and spiritual commitments of SCLC. And at the core of this task is reflection on the relationships between the concepts of love, justice, and power.

King begins his exploration of this theme with a strong assertion that the African American community should be unequivocally committed to gaining power that is has been denied. More specifically, he asserts the necessity of discerning “how to organize our strength in to economic and political power.” For King, this assertion is rooted in the conviction that the history of the United States has included a concerted, unjust, dehumanizing effort by many whites to deny these forms of power to the black community. He assesses the needs of the present hour in the light of this history:

From the old plantations of the South to the newer ghettos of the North, the Negro has been confined to a life of voicelessness (*That's true*) and powerlessness. (*So true*) Stripped of the right to make decisions concerning his life and destiny he has been subject to the authoritarian and sometimes whimsical decisions of the white power structure. The plantation and the ghetto were created by those who had power, both to confine those who had no power and to perpetuate their powerlessness. Now the problem of transforming the ghetto, therefore, is a problem of power, a confrontation between the forces of power demanding change and the forces of power dedicated to the preserving of the status quo.

This passage reveals Kings consistent tendency to consider ethical questions within a historical framework. The current struggles for racial equity cannot be separated from a history of injustice. The ghetto must be understood in light of the plantation. Both of those have stripped black people of their power to make decisions concerning their lives

and destinies. Both have been created and sustained by white power structures with the aim of preserving these same structures. The Civil Rights movement must be understood as the struggle between competing powers: One that seeks to maintain an unjust status quo, and another that seeks to change the present order. This assessment of the past and present informs King's definition of the power that African Americans must seek: "power properly understood is nothing but the ability to achieve purpose. It is the strength required to bring about social, political, and economic change." In short, the black community must seek the ability to enact a new social order of justice and freedom for all.

At this point in the speech, King shifts gears to address the hesitancy that many members of his largely Christian audience might feel about this talk regarding power. King, himself, has been reluctant to embrace the term "black power," which he believes to have connotations of violence that would be both immoral and counterproductive. And he acknowledges that the assembly of preachers is likely to include people who have moral convictions that lead them to be wary of the will to power, which sounds more Nietzschean than Christian. King confronts these concerns head on, arguing that one of the most devastating errors of the Western philosophical tradition has been a tendency to think "that the concepts of love and power" are mutually exclusive, so that "love is identified with a resignation of power, and power with a denial of love." He identifies the error of thinking about love and power as oppositional as the basis both for Nietzsche's critique of Christianity and for many theologians' reaction to Nietzsche: "It was this misinterpretation that caused the philosopher Nietzsche, who was a philosopher of the will to power, to reject the Christian concept of love. It was this same

misinterpretation which induced Christian theologians to reject Nietzsche's philosophy of the will to power in the name of the Christian idea of love.” For King, there is not such thing as an opposition between love and power. Nor is there any need to “balance” the two concerns (as some have wrongly interpreted King), which would imply that an increase of one would mean a decrease of the other. The relationship between these concepts must be thought of in an entirely different way.

In the next section of this speech, King attempts a reformulation of the relationship of love, power, and justice that is worthy of serious consideration. Though his ideas need some fleshing out, they are both profound and elegant:

What is needed is a realization that power without love is reckless and abusive, and that love without power is sentimental and anemic. (*Yes*) Power at its best [*applause*], power at its best is love (*Yes*) implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is love correcting everything that stands against love. (*Speak*) And this is what we must see as we move on.

King first rejects any will-to-power that is unguided by love, the cornerstone of Christian social ethics. Whether such power is untethered to any moral concept, or—as in the case of some “black power” advocates—sought in the name of a justice that is compatible with hatred for one’s enemies, King declares that loveless power will ultimately be “reckless and abusive.” But—more provocatively for his Christian audience—he also claims that any concept of love that is divorced from the power to enact justice should be rejected as flimsy sentimentalism. Rather than loveless power or powerless love, King claims that redemptive power just *is* love—true love, *agape*—aiming to implement the demands of justice. This claim would be difficult to defend if justice is thought of exclusively in terms of retribution, but King claims that justice “at its best”—presumably meaning the justice called for by Christ and the prophets of Israel—is “love correcting everything that stands against love.” The phrase “everything

that stands against love” here seems to refer to any obstacle that hinders the wellbeing of the one beloved. Rectifying justice removes barriers to human flourishing. Christian love provides the motivation to work hard, freely sacrificing one’s own comforts and even one’s own life, for the good of others, which includes removing obstacles to their flourishing. If love is to move beyond sentiment to the realm of meaningful action, it must not only sympathize with those who suffer injustice but also seek strategies that effectively pursue the goal of their flourishing. Redemptive power is love seeking to remove every injustice that hinders those whom one loves from realizing the joy and dignity that befits their nature as image bearers of God.

This basic way of thinking about love, power, and justice has continued to exert major influence among a variety of individuals and movements that are connected in more or less direct ways with the legacy of King. Leaders such as Desmond Tutu and John M. Perkins—with whom this chapter began—associate themselves directly with this tradition. In his recently published memoirs, Perkins reflects wisely on this moral, spiritual, and political tradition, of which he has been a leading figure for half a century. “Injustice is an evil in society that must be fought,” Perkins writes, but then he asks the important question: “what does that fight look like?” (67) After a brief description of how the Montgomery Bus Boycott grew out reflections on the teaching of Jesus, Perkins offers the following observations:

One of the great surprises of recent history is the idea of nonviolent protests. Dr. King, Gandhi, Cesar Chaves, Bishop Desmond Tutu, Nelson Mandela (after he came out of prison), and others led revolutions that didn’t depend on bloodshed and the violent overthrow of power structures. They realized the power in what Jesus taught about loving our enemies. (67)

Unjust power structures need to be overthrown, and the last century has provided numerous examples from across the globe of leaders who have found Jesus’ teaching on

love to be not only an inspiring moral ideal, but also a source of just power with which to resist and overcome the powers of injustice. Perkins proceeds to describe terrorism as an effort to use violence to create chaos in the face of powers that one feels cannot be overcome any other way. But he warns: “That’s what people use when they don’t have the power to win. Nonviolence is a better way” (67). Perkins’ life and leadership for decades have been a witness to the real potency of love-driven strategies of community development and public witness to overcome deeply entrenched injustices, and he has embodied these strategies with a graciousness towards his enemies that has inspired many to follow suit.

The close association between love and power in the thinking of figures such King and Perkins raises questions about how the power of love operates. Is it the power of persuasion? Of conversion? Can love be exercised as a form of coercive power, forcing people to act contrary to their desires? Though nonviolence has sometimes been characterized as a political strategy that acts exclusively through moral suasion, the writing and speeches of its most prominent practitioners are much more complicated than this. They do frequently talk about the potential of love to redeem one’s enemies by exposing evil and inspiring repentance. In this respect, love aims at the conversion of the oppressor. But these same practitioners also frequently speak of nonviolent direct action as a technique of love designed to create tension, to put pressure on power holders, not only with an aim to convert them, but also with the goal of forcing those who refuse to repent to act in accordance with justice, even against their wishes. In this

respect, nonviolence can be a form of coercive power that is guided and disciplined by love.⁷⁶

King makes it clear in a number of key passages that he views nonviolence in this way. During his seminary studies, King had been profoundly influenced by Reinhold Niebuhr's ethical "realism." Niebuhr argues that love applies to interpersonal relationships, but a realistic account of human evil requires Christians who seek to restrain injustice at the broader levels of human social life to be willing to use coercive means to restrain it. Though King was permanently convinced by Niebuhr's analysis of social evil and his correction of theological liberalism's optimistic assessment of human nature, King argued even in seminary that Niebuhr fails to account for the real, transformative power of *agape* in human affairs. Throughout his subsequent years of Civil Rights leadership, King struggled to understand how a social ethic grounded thoroughly in *agape* could be consistent with the need for coercive power to restrain the actions of those who would stubbornly persist in sin.

The beginnings of synthesis of this problem are already apparent in King's first address of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. To the thousands of African Americans assembled at Holt Street Baptist Church for the first meeting of the Montgomery Improvement Association on December 5, 1955, King follows a narration of Rosa Parks' arrest and a description of the boycott strategy with an extended reflection on Christian ethics that describes in a nutshell the philosophy of the movement:

May I say to you, my friends, as I come to a close, and just giving some idea of why we are assembled here, that we must keep--and I want to stress this, in all of our doings, in all of our deliberations here this evening and all of the week

⁷⁶ For a cogent argument that King's form of nonviolent resistance must be conceived as a form of coercive power, see David L. Chappell, "Martin Luther King: Strategist of Nonviolent Force."

and while, --whatever we do--, we must keep God in the forefront. (Yeah) Let us be Christian in all of our actions. (That's right) But I want to tell you this evening that it is not enough for us to talk about love, love is one of the pivotal points of the Christian faith. There is another side called justice. And justice is really love in calculation. (All right) Justice is love correcting that which revolts against love. (Well) The Almighty God himself is not only, not the God just standing out saying through Hosea, "I love you, Israel." He's also the God that stands up before the nations and said: "Be still and know that I'm God (Yeah), that if you don't obey me I will break the backbone of your power (Yeah) and slap you out of the orbits of your international and national relationships." (That's right) Standing beside love is always justice, and we are only using the tools of justice. Not only are we using the tools of persuasion, but we've come to see that we've got to use the tools of coercion. Not only is this thing a process of education, but it is also a process of legislation. (Yeah) [applause]

King calls for a theocentric movement that is thoroughly shaped by a Christian moral vision. And he argues that the love which drives this vision, which is rooted in the love of God, must be understood in relationship to a biblical understanding of divine justice. For King, this means—quite explicitly—that the “tools of persuasion” must be used alongside the “tools of coercion.” The goal is not only to educate, to convince people that racial segregation is wrong, but also to legislate, thus drawing upon the civil authority to coerce desegregation even among those who resist the moral reality of the situation.

In this early speech, King’s comments could be interpreted to mean that coercive power describes the “tools of justice” as opposed to the “tools of love,” which aim at persuasion, and it may very well be that this is what King has in mind. Once again he wrestles with these matters six months later at Religious Leaders Conference in Washington, D.C., where he offers reflections that anticipate his mature statements regarding love and power:

As churchmen, we naturally would prefer that men would voluntarily comply with the requirements of [federal contracts mandating nondiscrimination], but no one knows better than we do the problems and limitations of maintaining order and moral growth merely by means of persuasion and conviction. Love and

persuasion are virtues that are basic and essential, but they must forever be complimented by justice and moral coercion. Without love, justice becomes cold and empty; without justice, love [becomes] sentimental and empty. We must come to see that justice is love, correcting and controlling all that stands against love.

The point, here, is that Christian love for oppressors should not be understood in a way that tolerates their continued willful acts of injustice. This conception of love, which would merely seek to educate and persuade, is ultimately unloving to those who are oppressed. The persistence of racial segregation “stands against love” for the black people who continually suffer due to such injustice. Love for the oppressor must be understood in a way that is consistent with a commitment to justice for the whole community, even if this requires the “moral coercion” of segregationists. In other words, a love ethic that would not be “sentimental and empty” must understand justice and love in relation to one another. A thoroughgoing commitment to justice corrects a misguided notion of love that would make peace with consistent social evil, and a thoroughgoing commitment to love corrects a misguided notion of justice that would perpetuate chaos by meeting violence and hate with more violence and hate. This means nonviolent direct action that seeks to persuade, convert, and educate, but also exerts political and economic pressure (through boycotts and sit-ins) aimed at forcing the hands of those who refuse to be educated.

King develops these ideas further in his famous “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” written in 1963. In this letter, King is responding to criticism from a group of moderate white clergy members who condemn his use of protest methods that provoke violence and do economic harm. These are precisely the “tools of coercion” that King has employed as tactical expressions of his love-driven commitment to justice, and King’s response to his critics counters that their failure to directly confront injustice in

the name of love is, in fact, unloving to those who continue suffering oppression. Specifically, he responds that their call for “negotiation” is correct, but it fails to account for the impossibility of negotiation due to the unjust balance of power. Thus, he writes, the protests and sit-ins that they condemn are forms of nonviolent direct action designed “to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks to so dramatize the issue that it can no longer be ignored.” Rejecting both the destructive tension caused by violence and the passive participation with injustice represented by his moderate critics, King calls for a radical love, expressed through nonviolent resistance, which brings to the surface those deep tensions that already permeate a racist society. He accuses his white moderate opponents of being committed to a “negative peace which is the absence of tension” rather than “a positive peace which is the presence of justice.” King employs a graphic medical image to illustrate the necessity for exposing the tensions that are already present in a racist society: “Like a boil that can never be cured so long as it is covered up but must be opened with all its ugliness to the natural medicines of air and light, injustice must be exposed, with all the tension its exposure creates, to the light of human conscience and the air of national opinion before it can be cured.” Consistent with the teachings of Jesus on forgiveness, King argues that the first step to reconciliation—the “positive peace” which is the true aim of Christian peacemakers—is to expose and denounce evil, calling for repentance. When the power holders of a society have deep, vested interests in preventing this exposure, King argues that nonviolent forms of coercive power are the best response of love that aims powerfully to move the world toward justice.

Now, Christian theologians today may want to raise questions about this way of thinking. They might want to ask, for example, about the relationship between civil and ecclesial spheres of authority, or about the exegetical basis for the view of love espoused by King and other modern leaders such as Chavez, Perkins, and Tutu. They also might want to inquire whether instigating and organizing nonviolent direct action campaigns are valid uses of scarce time and resources for pastor of local churches, or whether such activity is better left to private Christian citizens, so that churches' ministries of spiritual nurture through word and sacrament are not neglected. These are important and pressing questions, to which I shortly turn. But before tackling such questions in the abstract, it is worth pausing to reckon with the fact that—over the course of the last seven decades—the centuries-old spiritual, moral, and political struggles of African American Christians with racial injustice have produced a powerful and creative way of confronting social evil that is rooted in the prophets of Israel, the teaching of Jesus, and the New Testament epistles, and this theologically-rooted praxis of love has already brought about epoch-making social transformations. Not only did the Civil Rights movement permanently alter the cultural landscape of the United States, it has already inspired countless other movements of peaceful resistance to injustice all over the world. Given the staggering significance of this movement, spearheaded by beleaguered churches of marginalized people, it is worth pausing to take in the fact that something remarkable has happened. Tackling the complex theological questions will be done more faithfully if it is done in a spirit of awe and gratitude for the fact that black Christians young and old walked out of their churches and into streets where they were clubbed, kicked, murdered, and arrested so that

apartheid regimes could crumble all across the planet. Great peacemakers have walked among us. They are blessed, they will be called children of God, and their witness needs to be heeded.

4.13. The Church and Civil Authority

The Bible does not contain a developed theory of the ideal relationship between church and state. One reason for this is that—other than brief protological passages and scattered eschatological visions—the Bible is not concerned with an ideal world at all. It speaks to this world, a broken world. It describes the acts of God and the people of God in a variety of historical and cultural situations, all of which are marked by violence, oppression, and sin. Moreover, the books of the Old and New Testaments are by no means homogeneous in their attitude towards various forms of civil authority. The book of judges is a theological apologia for the Davidic dynasty, and thus the narratives of the book continually emphasize the implosion of the covenantal community due to a lack of righteous leadership, leading up to the concluding verse: “In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (Jdg. 21:25). In stark contrast, the book of Samuel is much more ambivalent towards the kingship, portraying Israel’s desire for a king “like all the other nations” (1 Sam. 8:20) as a rejection of the reign of Yahweh (1 Sam. 8:7), which will inevitably lead to the people’s oppression by their human king (1 Sam. 8:11-18). After establishing high hopes for David as a king after God’s own heart, the book of Samuel ends with a narrative to the effect that David is guilty of the same destructive arrogance from which the people hoped that their kings would deliver them (1 Sam. 2:1-20; 2 Sam. 24). The New

Testament witness is equally complex. Paul and Peter emphasize the need for Christians to be good citizens who honor the emperor, pray for rulers, pay taxes, and live quiet, productive lives of faithful witness (Rom. 13:1-7; 1 Thes. 4:11-12; 1 Tim. 2:1-4; 1 Peter 2:13-15). The Revelation of John, however, depicts Rome as a demonic beast, waging war against the church, but destined to be overthrown by the glorified king Jesus. This diversity of perspectives is shaped not only by diverse historical situations and the individual concerns of authors and their communities, but also by generic constraints. Thus, it is dangerous to take isolated scriptural texts as if they represent the final word on the relationship between the church and civil authority. Rather, the church needs to cultivate wisdom, shaped by the whole canon of scripture, as well as the experience of former generations of Christians, that can guide and inspire present action in new and complex situations.

With all of these caveats in mind, it is worthwhile to give some initial attention to Romans 13:1-7, in which Paul develops the most clear and direct statement in the New Testament about the church's relationship to civil power. In the first half of Romans 12, Paul gives instructions on the how the Christian community is to embody Christ's love in its internal relationships (12:3-16). He then transitions in the latter half of this chapter to speak about how Christians should relate to their enemies and persecutors, echoing the teaching of Jesus that they should bless those who curse them and "overcome evil with good" (12:14, 17-21). It is in this context—a discussion of how the church should love its enemies—that Paul introduces his discussion of relating to civil authorities. Many interpreters of Romans 13 have ignored this important context, despite the fact that Paul's letter is to the church in Rome, which had suffered

persecution from the civil authorities for many years. Most of the Jewish Christians among the letter's readers would have recently returned from exile due to a persecutory decree of Claudius roughly a decade after the execution of Jesus (Moo 4-5). When Paul speaks of blessing persecutors and leaving vengeance to the wrath of God (Rom. 12:14, 19), his audience would almost certainly have thought first of Roman civil authorities, which makes it unsurprising that he immediately addresses this issue head on.

Karl Barth, in his famous theological commentary, *The Epistle to the Romans*, is more sensitive to this situation than most interpreters of Paul have been. To highlight this point, Barth notes that the final verse of chapter 12—"Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (12:21)—functions as a transition not only by concluding the previous section of the letter, but also by introducing the subsequent section on the church's relation to governing authorities. That such authorities are complicit in the world's evil, which must be overcome by good, was an unavoidable existential fact for the first readers of this epistle. Moreover, as Barth rightly says, it is highly unlikely that anyone would be won over to a reactionary conservatism by Paul's letters to the Romans, in which "an attitude of negation" towards "the present order" predominates (cf. Rom. 1:18-3:20; 12:2), but the epistle could be misunderstood in a way that justifies violent political upheaval. It is this misunderstanding that Paul now seeks to counteract. His commitment to "overcome evil" is radical—and, I would say, utterly revolutionary—but this is not a revolution of violent power clashing with violent power. It is a revolution of love. It is radical peacemaking. It is overcoming evil with good.

Following Barth, then, I take Romans 12:21-13:7 as a single unit. The text's significance in Christian thought makes it worth quoting in full and analyzing in some detail:

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and you will be commended. For the one in authority is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God's servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also as a matter of conscience. This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing. Give to everyone what you owe them: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor.

The church at Rome would almost certainly have been tempted to regard the whole infrastructure of Roman imperial power as irredeemably evil, and to reject all claims of governing authorities as incompatible with the universal lordship of the resurrected Jesus Christ, which is at the heart of Paul's gospel (Rom. 1:1-4). But Paul rejects this idea outright. Though Rome is certainly enmeshed in the destructive evil of the world, overcoming this evil with good requires respect for the divinely sanctioned role of civil authority as such. The Christian community should be "subject to the governing authorities" because the "authorities that exist have been established by God." To rebel against civil authority as such is to rebel against God. Rather than rebelling in this way, Christians should submit by paying taxes and showing due honor to those in positions of governing authority.

In the midst of these exhortations, Paul describes the purpose for which civil authority exists. Those who are “in authority” are described as “God’s servants for your good.” On one hand, this means that those occupying positions of civil power should be respected. On the other hand, this means that all such rulers are subjected to the higher authority of God. Rome, too, is subject to the lordship of Jesus. And God has permitted those in such positions of civil authority to exercise the role for the good of the people. Moreover, Paul says that God allows such powers to “bear the sword”—a symbol of violent coercive power—in order to be agents of divine wrath towards the “wrongdoer.” If wielded according to divine justice, this “sword” of civil power would punish the unjust, oppressors, those who abuse the widow, the fatherless, sojourners, and the poor. The result would be that other perpetrators of injustice would be in “terror,” and the pervasive, dehumanizing presence of evil in the world would be restrained. Thus, according to Paul, the divine wisdom providentially decrees that civil authorities should bear coercive power for the negative purpose of restraining injustice in the world. Though such powers are themselves prone to become oppressive (as the biblical books of Samuel, Ecclesiastes, and Revelation—in addition to almost all of the Old Testament prophets—make abundantly clear), their net affect makes humanity’s capacity for self-destruction less likely than if no such restraining forces were in place.

This raises the question, then: Is Paul teaching something like the doctrine of the “divine right of kings,” which would play such a major role in the thought of the Christian West in subsequent centuries? While many theologians of post-Constantine eras would interpret Romans in a way that seems to shore-up the legitimacy of the existing power structure and all of its actions, the first centuries of Christians tended to

take a much more nuanced approach. For example, Origen—who, like Paul and many of the first readers of his letter, was eventually executed by the Roman governing authorities—writes in his *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*:

What does Paul mean when he says that “there is no authority except from God?” Is an authority which persecutes the children of God, which attacks the faith and which undermines our religion, from God? We shall answer this briefly. Nobody will deny that our senses—sight, sound and thought—are given to us by God. But although we get them from God, what we do with them is up to us God will judge us righteously for having abused what he gave us to use for good. Likewise, God’s judgment against the authorities will be just, if they have used the powers they have received according to their own ungodliness and not according to the laws of God. (5:92-94)

For Origen, stating that civil authorities are from God does not validate the persons who hold civil authority or their actions, which might be agents of the evil that they have been appointed to restrain. Civil powers are subject to divine judgment. Moreover, Origen’s analogy—comparing governing authorities to bodily senses—is worth unpacking further. To say that God creates ears and the sense of hearing is not to say that both might become unhealthy and disordered. Disordered bodily organs need to be healed. And, through this would have been unthinkable in Origen’s time, few Christians today would object to the amputation of a damaged bodily organ and its replacement by a transplanted healthy organ. Far from dishonoring the fact that God has providentially ordained the organ for a good purpose, this wise and creative use of human resources would serve to restore the purpose for which God has created the organ. Likewise, Romans 13 is not incompatible with taking drastic measure, within Christian moral parameters, to reform or replace an order of civil power that has badly failed to fulfill its God-given purpose of restraining evil and promoting the common good. Finally, it is worth noting that bodily organs and senses are part of God’s original created order, but Paul presents governing authorities—at least in their current form—as an

accommodation to human evil. In the world's fallen state, they ought to be a gift of grace, but this does not mean that they have a place in the permanent order of things to be established at the consummation of God's good purposes for his new creation.

In addition to considering the ways that Christians before Constantine read this text, it is worth exploring how it has been understood by those who have faced the most devastating abuses of civil power in the modern era. In this respect, Karl Barth is once again worth consulting. Barth's commentary on Romans first appeared in Germany in 1918, and he is necessarily reading Paul against the backdrop not only of World War I, but also of the Russian revolutions. In this context, Barth writes that the Christian—confronted with the claims of political powers that “demand recognition and obedience”—feels pressured either to admit the truth of such claims, conceding to “the principle of Legitimism,” or to reject these claims, thus accepting “the principle of Revolution” (477). But Barth argues that both options, as they are generally understood, must be rejected.

Against legitimism, Barth asks (in good existentialist fashion), “What are [rulers] but men hypocritically engaged in setting things in order, in order that they may—cowards that they are—ensure themselves against the riddle of their own existence?” (478). Moreover, he rejects outright the hubristic claim of any humans that they, “as a matter of course,” possess the right “to regulate and predetermine” the conduct of other humans, as well as the blasphemous effort to crown “such a manifestly fraudulent claim” with a “halo of real power,” granted by the authority of God (479). For Barth, “every existing government” overreaches, proclaiming “itself to be the peace which all men yearn after,” thus idolatrously promoting the “pseudo-transcendence of

an altogether immanent order” (479). He asks, rhetorically: “Is there anywhere legality which is not fundamentally illegal? Is there anywhere authority which is not ultimately based upon tyranny?” (480) Clearly, Barth does not wish Paul’s epistle to the Romans to be abused by “Legitimists,” who claim divine approval for the inevitably perverse existing social order, thus baptizing injustice and blaspheming the name of God. In this way, Legitimists are “overcome by evil” and thus incapable of overcoming evil with good.

On the other hand, Barth rejects the “principle of Revolution” with equal—or, perhaps, greater—emphasis. The Revolutionary, on Barth’s account, sees much more clearly than the Legitimist the reprehensible absurdity latent in the claims of every existing governmental order to be the transcendent means of ultimate peace. In this sense, the Revolutionary is a witness to God’s “no!” to the oppressive powers of the world. But in rejecting the status quo, advocates of revolution make the mistake of claiming that they will establish the new order, the true order of salvation and peace. As Barth puts it: “The revolutionary aims at the Revolution by which the true Order is to be inaugurated, but he launches another revolution which is, in fact, reaction” (481). Revolutionaries end up making claims for themselves and their political vision that simply recapitulate in new ways the hubristic assertion of existing governments that they have a right to regulate and determine the lives of other humans. Moreover, these revolutions are, generally, reactions, basing all of their claims for universal salvation upon the dethronement of a ruling enemy, whether this is a literal king, capitalism, or some other foe. Barth argues that the gross violence in which political revolutions generally terminate begins in an arrogant, consuming hatred of the present order. In the

midst of justified resentment toward the status quo, revolutionaries become blind to the tyrannical quality of their own efforts to impose a new order on the world. The innocent blood that comes to be shed in almost all revolutions is an accidental symptom of the more essential fact that the revolutionary has already been “overcome by evil” in the form of arrogance, hatred, and tyranny. With an apt reference to Dostoevsky’s *The Brother’s Karamazov*, Barth writes that the revolutionary “forgets that he is not the One, that he is not the subject of the freedom which he so earnestly desires, that, for all the strange brightness of his eyes, he is not the Christ who stands before the Grand Inquisitor, but is, contrawise, the Grand Inquisitor encountered by the Christ” (480). The messianic pretension of revolutionaries, like those of legitimists, must be denounced as another manner of being overcome by evil, when the Christian is called to overcome evil with good.

I am inclined to believe that there is considerable wisdom in Barth’s denunciations of the polarized political options that he perceived in Europe at the end of the twentieth century’s second decade, but it remains to be seen what positive vision Barth has for “overcoming evil with good.” And, in this text, the answer seems to be an existentialist withdraw. The church rejects all human pretension to save the world, and simply confesses that God alone can save. This confession powerfully subverts the ideologies undergirding every form of oppressive politics, but it does not deal directly with the wicked reality of starving, oppressed persons, about which the Bolsheviks were so justly outraged. Barth claims simply that Paul’s ethic of “submission” in Romans 13 is “purely negative”: “It means to withdraw and make way; it means to have no resentment, and not to overthrow” (481). The Christian response to injustice that Barth

here finds in Paul is rather difficult to distinguish on a practical level from that of the “legitimists” whom he denounces. The next two decades of history, however, would force Barth to flesh out more fully what a Christian rejection of “legitimism” means in the church’s confrontation with great social evil.

Barth would, of course, become deeply involved in the struggles of the German church against the Nazi regime. Though he would not go so far as his friend and ally Dietrich Bonhoeffer in the active efforts to assassinate Hitler and overthrow his regime, Barth’s own deep involvement with the German churches included drafting the Barman Declaration of 1934, in which a federation of Protestant congregations called the German Confessing Churches publicly denounced the doctrine and practices of the German Evangelical Church, which had become complicit with Nazism. The declaration focuses upon denouncing every form of idolatry, resisting the encroachment of civil powers into area of church doctrine and discipline, and proclaiming the universal lordship of Christ. Many leaders associated with the movement would lose their freedom or their lives, and Barth’s proximity to the whole affair forced him to think more deeply about the public responsibility of the church to responsibly bear witness to Jesus, not only in private church teaching, but also in responsible public action.

Barth’s more mature reflections on the matter are apparent in a series of lectures he delivered on the Apostles’ Creed in Germany in 1946, subsequently published as *Dogmatics in Outline*. In his opening lectures on the meaning of Christian faith, Barth follows his variations on the standard exposition of faith as trust and knowledge with a third lecture, “Faith as Confession.” He defines this aspect of his exposition as follows:

“Christian faith is the decision in which men have the freedom to be publicly responsible for their trust in God’s Word and for their knowledge of the truth of Jesus Christ, in the language of the Church, but also in worldly attitudes and above all in their corresponding actions and conduct” (28). To be a disciple of Jesus, personal trust in Christ, guided by true knowledge of the gospel, must find expression in responsible public action. Barth emphasizes that the place of the church is in the world, that every Christian is not only a Christian, but also “a bit of the world,” that Christ sent his disciples out into the world, and that “the Church exists for the sake of the world” (32). This means that Christians must not retreat into their sanctuaries as a way of avoiding the conflicts, problems, and politics of the world. Nor may they be content only to speak in the language of the church’s scriptures and hymns. They must learn to take responsibility for their life in the world. Christians must translate their convictions into worldly attitudes and into the language of the newspaper.

In particular, Barth emphasizes that Christians must develop distinctive political attitudes that are expressed in concrete actions that are appropriate to their specific situations. In this respect, he sites the failure of the German churches during the 1930s. Barth claims that there were many vibrant evangelical churches of sincere conviction in 1933, but these failed to translate their theology into a compelling public witness in the life of Germany, which was an absolute necessity in the political climate of the time. Followers of Jesus failed to “translate what was being excellently said in the language of the Church into the political attitude demanded at the time, in which it would have become clear that the Evangelical Church had to say, ‘No’ to National Socialism, ‘No’ from its very roots” (33). Barth argues that it would be an equal failure for the German

churches of 1946 to fail to acknowledge their participation in the evils of the preceding decade, and that this failure to repent would render the church utterly fruitless. Moreover, Barth makes it clear that the church's publically responsible political attitudes must be expressed in the concrete actions of love: "What would it avail a man, if he should speak and confess in most powerful language, and had not love? Confession means a living confession. If you believe, you are challenged to pay in person That is the crucial point" (34). Barth argues that the church had a responsibility to say "No" to National Socialism and to express this "No" with corresponding actions, driven by Christian love. This is something rather different than the "withdraw and make way" approach commended in his earlier commentary on Romans.

And this brings me back to Paul. What does Paul mean, after all, by telling the church in Rome to "submit" to all "governing authorities"? In context, it is clear that he means, at minimum, paying taxes and showing respect to those in positions of civil power. But it is also clear that neither Paul nor the other apostles believed citizens' submission to ruling powers ought to be absolute. Paul himself was flogged, repeatedly imprisoned, and eventually executed by Rome, rather than renouncing his commitment to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ. Likewise, the book of Acts states that Peter and John responded to the command of the "rulers and elders and scribes" in Jerusalem not to speak in the name of Jesus with respectful defiance: "Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard" (Act. 4:5, 19-20). These examples all have to do specifically with the church's proclamation of the gospel, but we could also ask the

hypothetical question: If the apostles were commanded by Roman law to enforce some inherently unjust action—say, to turn in all Scythians to the local magistrate, who would see to their systematic execution—would they have complied? Since the apostles teach that governing authorities are servants of God, and that Christians must choose to obey God rather than these authorities when the two are in conflict, it seems clear that the apostles would not have complied with Roman mandated ethnic cleansing of Scythians. In other words, civil disobedience is rooted in Christian convictions about the nature of civil authority. But since the “sword” is given to the governing authority—not to the church—this disobedience must necessarily be nonviolent.

This way of thinking about the church’s relation to civil authority is consistent both with the life and teaching of Jesus. Jesus famously teaches his followers to “render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s” (Matt. 22:21), and he says to Pontius Pilate, “You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above” (Jn. 19:11). Thus, Paul’s doctrine that civil authorities exist by divine decree and should be treated with appropriate honor, which includes the payment of taxes, is clearly rooted in the teaching of Jesus himself. On the other hand, there is a wide scholarly consensus that Jesus’s life and teaching are a concerted resistance to Roman imperial ideology.⁷⁷ He does this not by developing a strategy for political takeover, but by embodying in his life and in the community of his disciples an entirely different way of being human—an alternative polis within the polis of Rome—that is characterized by radical generosity, contentment, love, forgiveness, and hospitality.

⁷⁷ For an influential presentation of this view, see John Howard Yoder’s *The Politics of Jesus*, especially pp. 1-59.

When the counter-community of Jesus' disciples comes into contact with the oppressive power of Rome, the paradigmatic response is described in Jesus' famous teaching about going "the second mile." In the gospel of Matthew, a string of sayings about non-retaliation and love for enemies includes Jesus' subtle and shocking command: "And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles" (Matt. 5:41). The phrase "forces you to go" renders a Greek term (*angareuo*) with military denotations, used in Jesus' context for a Roman soldier's legally sanctioned act of enlisting forced labor. This included the practice of forcing passersby to work as porters according to the soldier's whim (France 221). The only other instance of this word in the New Testament occurs later in Matthew's gospel, when Roman soldiers force Simon of Cyrene to carry the cross of Christ (Matt. 27:32). All of the power in this scenario was on the Roman side; even the word "mile" in this text refers to a Roman, rather than a Jewish, unit of measure (France 222). But Jesus teaches his disciples to respond to soldiers' exploitation of this law in a way that nonviolently challenges the power relation. The practice of Roman soldiers, acting in accord with the unjust privilege they have been granted by law, dehumanized the colonized Jewish residents. It treated them worse than they deserve. But disciples of Jesus are to respond in a manner that re-humanizes the relationship in love. By going farther than what the soldier had demanded (using the coercive power of an unjust law), the disciple chooses to serve, not under compulsion, but gratuitously. The second mile is a gift, an act of prevenient grace, unmerited love. But it is designed to expose the injustice of the situation by affirming in both parties a shared humanity that was repressed by the initial act of injustice. This is love exposing oppression, and thus creating the possibility of

repentance and reconciliation. The same kind of love is displayed on the cross, where Jesus asks God to forgive those who crucify him, an act of prevenient grace that plays a role in the on-looking soldier's subsequent confession that Jesus is the Son of God (Lk. 23:34, 49; cf. Mk. 15:39). This is love confronting injustice nonviolently, with transforming power.

Finally, the model of thinking about the relationship between the church and civil authorities that I have been developing here is deeply consistent with several important strands of Old Testament teaching. The Hebrew scriptures repeatedly speak of the role of rulers as doing righteousness and justice, with a particular concern to protect vulnerable classes, such as widows, the fatherless, immigrants, the disabled, and the poor. When those in positions of civil power act according to these principles of justice, the Old Testament teaches that they are blessed by God. But if they act unjustly, abusing their power by exploiting the vulnerable, they are under the judgment of God. One of the major functions of Israel's prophets is to call civil and religious leaders to account for their violations of justice. The rule of law—and of those who make laws and enforce them—is never questioned as such. But unjust laws, and the enforcement of unjust policies, are openly and repeatedly denounced. The prophetic literature of the Old Testament is full of examples to illustrate this point, but, for now, one such example will suffice. In Isaiah 10:1-2, the prophet denounces lawmakers who exploit the vulnerable in the following terms: “Woe to those who make unjust laws, to those who issue oppressive decrees, to deprive the poor of their rights and withhold justice from the oppressed of my people, making widows their prey and robbing the fatherless.” Civil authority, as such, is approved as a means of restraining violence and

injustice. But when those who possess such power use it to perpetuate the evils they are supposed to be holding in check, a commitment to the higher authority of God requires that such power must be resisted.

4.14. Four Biblical Paradigms for Christian Cultural Engagement

Contemporary Christians are living in a historically unprecedented situation. We are not in the position of Moses or David, whose task was to structure every aspect of society according to the revealed standards of God's covenant with Israel. We are not in the situation of Jesus or the apostolic churches, which had no power whatsoever to affect directly the political and economic structures of the Roman society in which they lived as a tiny, persecuted minority. Looking back at twenty centuries of church history, there are plenty of models of the church living as a small minority in a pagan society, and there are also models of Christians acting as stewards of Christendom, in which heads of church and state cooperate (or fail to do so) in their efforts to construct what they imagine to be a Christian society. But we are in neither of these situations. Rather, we are part of a multi-ethnic, global Christian community—comprising roughly a third of the world population—which is scattered in such a way that, despite its large numbers, it does not hold the reigns of power in any nation on earth.

Nonetheless, disciples of Jesus in the contemporary West generally do have substantially more power than they acknowledge. In my American context, to be a citizen is already to be enmeshed in power. In this remarkably wealthy nation, which still possesses military dominance on a global stage that is unmatched by any other empire in history, U.S. citizens have the power to vote, to lobby, to contact elected

officials directly, to run for public office, and to exercise moral suasion in the public sphere through any number of means. The fact that most citizens do not exert most of their political agency very vigorously does not change the reality that they could do so if they chose. Moreover, American Christians also have power of a less official kind, which is probably more important. They can organize, found institutions, develop local community assets, and create new forms of culture. Given the relative freedom and prosperity of the United States, its churches today have as much opportunity as any generation of Christians in history to embody creatively the polis of Jesus with little reference to the channels of power that are generally called “political.”

Indeed, one of the great needs of the hour is to remember and create ways of acting politically that have nothing to do with the usual channels for such action. Christians in the United States have been far too focused on endorsing particular parties, platforms, and candidates while neglecting the quiet disciplines of faithful presence in local communities that have tremendous power to enact change from the bottom up. Even in terms of vocal public witness, there is need to rethink what it would take for the church to offer a unified, coherent vision of the common good that is not constrained by partisan political allegiances, which are utterly foreign to the transcultural community of Jesus. As Christians in America, we need to heed once again Paul’s exhortation: “Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Rom. 12:1-3). A political praxis that is not conformed to American partisan patterns but transformed by the gospel of Christ would necessarily embody a counter-cultural wisdom. And living wisely as followers of Jesus in such a time and place as this requires both fidelity to biblical models and a creative capacity to “follow the old paths”

in a new, contextually appropriate ways. Such wisdom should be informed by the whole canon of scripture and by the history of the church, in which previous generations have sought to interpret and apply biblical wisdom to their own diverse contexts. And, as I suggested in my introduction to this dissertation, such wisdom must also be forged in the concrete struggles of the church, rooted in the real pressures of the present hour. In a preliminary effort to articulate forms that wise and creative peacemaking could take in contexts such as my own, I propose four basic biblical paradigms of cultural engagement, which can provide some direction for contemporary Christians seeking to embody the love and justice of Jesus.

First, the church can actively equip and support individual members to work redemptively within the broken structures of contemporary society. In this respect, there is profound wisdom in the simple counsel of John the Baptist recorded in Luke's gospel. After proclaiming that the kingdom of God is at hand (a history-altering reality) and calling for all people to repent (to radically reorient their lives) in accordance with this remarkable news, many of John's hearers undoubtedly expected him to call for some form of asceticism, revolutionary politics, or other dramatic break from their previous pattern of living. But this doesn't happen. Instead, Luke writes:

And the crowds asked him, "What then shall we do?" And he answered them, "Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise." Tax collectors also came to be baptized and said to him, "Teacher, what shall we do?" And he said to them, "Collect no more than you are authorized to do." Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what shall we do?" And he said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages."

John's first response to the crowd's series of questions certainly calls for a lifestyle of radical contentment and generosity. But he apparently does not intend for this lifestyle to be pursued in isolation from the normal structures of Roman society. This point

becomes clear when he is approached by tax collectors and soldiers. Both of these groups represent the broken and oppressive systems of Roman power, and they were both despised by many of the Jews in John's audience. But he does not tell them to quit their jobs. Instead, he tells them to continue where they are, but to do so in a way that is characterized by the contentment and integrity befitting repentant citizens of God's kingdom. Given that bribery and economic exploitation were the norm in these profession, this would mean a dramatic decrease of income for John's hearers. But it would also mean the humble beginnings of a slow transformation of Roman society from the inside out.

A similar kind of unglamorous radicalism could have an incredible impact on the social inequities that plague American public life. Doctors could choose to move their practices into underserved communities, where they would receive significantly lower pay and fewer workplace advantages, but where their services could begin chipping away at the systemic health problems of communities that generally only receive medical treatment when they are forced by acute illness to visit the emergency room. Entrepreneurs could choose to make their focus the development of businesses that create jobs in low-income neighborhoods and generate capital that stays in the community. Teachers could choose to accept longer hours and lower pay in order to serve in under-resourced schools. Lawyers could choose to devote a significant portion of their time and energy to defending members of ethnic minority groups who are systemically over-incarcerated for petty offences, but who usually lack the means to obtain quality legal representation. Inner-city kids who work hard and overcome all odds to make it out of their communities and obtain college educations could then take

their resources back to the neighborhoods where they came from. All of these decisions would be against the grain of self-interest. They would all be acts of love: sacrificial self-giving for the good of others, aiming towards the flourishing of vulnerable people, motivated by gratitude for divine grace and a profound value for persons made in the image of God.

Every example in the preceding paragraph represents real decisions of Christians whom I know in Oklahoma City, including many members of Christ Community Church. Considered from the perspective of the city's broad challenges, these are small, individual decisions, but they have a large accumulative impact, because they reverse the normal trend in which everyone who has the resources to avoid the inner-city environment chooses to do so, thus perpetuating the community's problems. And though I have described the choices of individuals to work against the grain of the deeply broken legal, education, economic, and medical structures of U.S. society, the local church has a huge role to play in these decisions. The church is a discipleship community, which teaches the vision of God's kingdom and cultivates the virtuous habits of action that motivate and sustain these decisions by individual members. Moreover, the church is a support network—a community of mutual care—in which those who are pouring themselves out to make a positive difference in the midst of broken systems can find emotional, spiritual, and material support that helps sustain them. This leads to my next biblical paradigm of cultural engagement and peacemaking.

Second, the church can find creative ways to embody an alternative polis that remains within the dominant culture while being formed by a radically different set of narratives and values. While John the Baptist taught people to live a transformed

lifestyle within the broken structures of the Roman Empire, the earliest Christians also found ways to organize their social life that expressed an entirely different way of being human in community. Two famous passages in the early chapters of Acts demonstrate this impulse:

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved. (Ac. 2:42-47)

Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common. And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. Thus Joseph, who was also called by the apostles Barnabas (which means son of encouragement), a Levite, a native of Cyprus, sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet. (Ac. 4:32-37)

These passages narrate unique and historically specific events, and I do not take them to be a normative standard for the church's life in all times and places. Nonetheless, they do serve as examples of the ways in which the church's shared life as a community of love can dramatize the alternative values of God's kingdom while remaining within a culture that does not share these values. The Christian communities described in these texts are devoted not only to prayer, the Lord's supper, and the apostolic teaching, but also to an embodied, material pattern of existence that is powerfully shaped by these spiritual practices. Notably, of course, this includes voluntary financial sharing, in

which the rich freely renounce their claim on the right to remain so, and, thus, there is no reason for anyone to be poor.

I have heard John Perkins say that one of the things he loves about the local church is its power as a financial sharing institution. I share this sentiment. In my own congregation, I have watched members give each other cars, pay off each other's student loans, and sell houses in which they had significant equity for the price of their mortgages, as a way of helping young families become home owners. All of this has happened organically, in addition to the ways that the church's official budget supports members. The possibilities become even more exciting when the church is considered more widely, including all the local churches in a particular geographic area, or even global networks of churches. When richer and poorer churches share resources in wise ways, they can provide material, relational, and spiritual support for individuals and families in under-resourced neighborhoods that has the power to powerfully counteract generational cycles of poverty. Strategies for doing this often seep into my next paradigm for biblical peacemaking and cultural engagement.

Third, the church can sacrificially share its resources to bless and protect the most vulnerable members of the communities in which it is located. I have described already in this chapter an order of love that is apparent in the New Testament. Christians respond to God's love by loving God, which is expressed in love for the Christian community, and extended outward to include all people. The last two steps of this order are succinctly described by Paul in Galatians 6:10: "So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith." Paul's "especially" is the reason why my second paradigm came

before my third. If the church scatters its resources in the direction of every surrounding need before it has learned to cultivate a just and peaceful community that cares in deep and meaningful ways for its own members, then its witness to the world as an embodiment of beloved community is seriously diminished. Moreover, the church that prioritizes reconciliation, sharing, and mutual care among Christians will generally have more sustainable spiritual, relational, and economic resources available to share with the outside community. But Paul's "everyone" is just as important as his "especially," and the teaching of Jesus emphasizes a practice of love that transgresses every cultural and religious boundary (Lk. 6:27-36; 10:25-37). This love can be expressed organically through personal acts of generosity for people in need, but great good can often be done through structured, collective efforts that wisely intervene on behalf of vulnerable groups and invest in developing the assets in under-resourced communities.

Unfortunately, many well-intentioned churches in the United States have moved quickly to actions in this area that are not particularly wise. For example, thousands of churches have food pantries in which middle class people pass out unhealthy food (which they would never eat) to poor individuals with chronic health problems, and those who receive this food are asked neither to decide what they want nor to contribute to the ministry in any way. Such efforts often suck up significant resources while creating long-term relationships of codependence that are destructive for everyone involved. Books like Robert Lupton's *Toxic Charity: How Churches and Charities Hurt Those They Help (And How to Reverse It)* provide tremendous practical guidance for determining better plans of action. In my judgment, the basic principles that should guide such efforts are to start with people in close proximity, allow those who are being

helped to have a leading role in determining vision and making decisions, invest resources in efforts that promote long-term wellbeing, and prioritize developing assets over meeting needs.⁷⁸

The first, second, and third biblical paradigms of peacemaking that I have described are best pursued in conjunction with one another, and the Christian Community Development Association (CCDA), founded by John M. Perkins, has a well-developed philosophy of ministry that has been forged in decades of experience by hundreds of leaders seeking just such an integrative approach. The first three principles of Christian Community Development (CCD) were coined by Perkins: relocation, reconciliation, and redistribution. The first two of these principles work against the tendency to think of “charity” as an activity that privileged groups do to help struggling groups in a different community. Instead, CCD is the collaborative efforts of people living in under-resourced areas. Perkins identified three categories of leaders for such efforts. “Remainers” are indigenous leaders from an at-risk community who are committed to staying in the area and working to rebuild from within. “Returners” are individuals who leave the area to gain an education or other resources that they could not access in the community, but then come back with the intention to use their new resources to invest these resources in the places from which they came. “Relocaters” are people from more privileged situations who move into the at-risk area in order to partner with indigenous leaders. Individuals from these three groups pursue Christ-centered relationships in the local church that transcend boundaries of ethnicity, gender,

⁷⁸ This last point signals the need for a philosophical shift in many churches and nonprofits from needs-based community service to assets-based community development. For guides on making this shift, see Robert Lupton’s *Toxic Charity* and John M. Perkins’ *Restoring At-Risk Communities*, as well as the website of DePaul University’s Asset-Based Community Development Institute.

and socioeconomic status. The principle of reconciliation shifts the question asked from “How do we help them?” or “How do we get them to help us?” to “How do we work together to pursue wholeness in our community?” This leads to the principle of redistribution, by which Perkins does not mean a redistribution of wealth so much as a redistribution of ownership. Practitioners of CCD are generally less interested in giving away free stuff than they are in developing healthy schools, providing job training, empowering indigenous entrepreneurs, and other efforts that reverse a situation in which the people in at-risk communities only have the option of working in environment where they are totally alienated from the wealth generated by their labor.

Over time, leaders within the CCDA network have developed five additional principles: leadership development, listening to the community, being church-based, taking a wholistic approach, and empowerment. I will not explore all five of these here, but the “church-based” principle deserves special note.⁷⁹ It is common for organized Christian efforts at peacemaking and community development to seek a vehicle in nonprofit institutions, and these nonprofits often drift further and further from local churches over time. The result of this is often that they are increasingly cut off from the resources of the church—its practices of word and sacrament, its theological vision, and its capacity to foster diverse, multigenerational, reconciled community—which ends up curtailing the efficacy of these organizations and shifting their original vision. They frequently lose their capacity to develop indigenous leaders, and their own leadership draws on a professional class of credentialed social workers. In a personal conversation

⁷⁹ For a more detailed description of all eight principles of CCD, see Wayne Gordon and John Perkins, *Making Neighborhood Whole: A Handbook for Christian Community Development*. A more concise description of the principles is also available on CCDA’s national website: <http://ccda.org/about/philosophy/>

with the leaders of Christ Community Church, John Perkins advised us to start non-profit organizations that could serve as the organizational vehicle for some of our development efforts, but to keep these organizations as closely connected to the church as possible. Thus far, this has proven to be wise counsel, enabling us to stay grounded in the community as well as the spiritual practices and theological convictions that make us who we are.

Fourth, the church can bear prophetic witness to those in positions of power: challenging dehumanizing ideologies, promoting a biblically-informed vision of comprehensive human flourishing, and defending the cause of those who are most vulnerable or exploited. The previous three biblical paradigms of cultural engagement and peacemaking are aimed at cultivating flourishing local communities, but they do not directly address the larger structures of power that often create and perpetuate local inequities. For example, Christ Community Church's efforts at community development must necessarily work against a host of legal and economic structures that make it exceedingly difficult for members of our community to achieve their goals and reach their God-given potential. In the previous chapter, I described how the outdated and inadequate immigration laws of the United States frequently disrupt the lives of innocent people. Another major factor in our community is the mass incarceration of black and Latino men for petty offences. When compared with other demographic groups, the disproportionate rate at which these men are imprisoned does not reflect a disproportionate propensity to commit crimes. Rather, a deeply inequitable criminal justice system creates this situation, which in turn contributes to other social problems—such as fatherlessness and unemployment—that perpetuate cycles of

poverty and human suffering.⁸⁰ Similar points could be made about the education and healthcare systems.

The question, then, is how love responds to such circumstances. If I begin with the golden rule, I can say this: If I was in a situation in which I faced major obstacles to human flourishing due to inequitable laws that I could not change, I would want people with influence on this situation to use their influence to change these laws. It seems, then, that love should at least start me down a path of asking what I could do to change the systems of law and public policy that provide major roadblocks for so many of my neighbors. This conviction is strengthened when I consider again the counsel given to King Lemuel by his mother: “Open your mouth for the mute, for the rights of all who are destitute. Open your mouth, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy” (Prov. 31:8-9). It is true that I am no king, but the text seems to have wider relevance regarding the wise and just use of social power. As a citizen of the United States, I have, at minimum, the power to vote, to affect public opinion in my network of relationships, and to communicate with elected officials. Moreover, the prophets of Israel continually call upon civil authorities to repent of exploiting the vulnerable and use their power to defend widows, the fatherless, immigrants, the disabled, and the poor. This is true not only for the rulers of Israel, whom the prophets call to justice and righteousness as a matter of covenant faithfulness, but also for pagan rulers, whom God likewise holds accountable for injustice towards his people (Isa. 16:1-13; Am. 1:13-15). In light of these biblical patterns, and the more general call to do justice and make peace as central aspects of Christian discipleship, it seems that speaking publicly and

⁸⁰ For a careful and well-documented analysis of this issue from a Christian perspective, see Troy Jackson et al. “CCDA Mass Incarceration White Paper 2015.”

prophetically about manifest injustices should be considered an aspect of faithful public witness for Christians in contexts like my own.

Individual Christians and churches will need to use contextually specific wisdom to discern what issues to speak about, when, and in what ways. The process of discernment should include prayer, biblical meditation, and careful listening to the voices of vulnerable and marginalized people. Broadly speaking, Christians should always be willing to denounce boldly ideologies that dehumanize God's image bearers and to hold before the world a biblically-informed vision of what life could be in God's peaceable kingdom (Isa. 2:1-5; 11:1-9). Moreover, Christians should be vigilant and courageous when it comes to speaking out on behalf of particular vulnerable groups that are being targeted. In retrospect, it is clear that those who lifted their voices clearly and persistently on behalf of slaves during the antebellum era, Jews during the Holocaust, and African Americans during the Civil Rights movement were acting in line with biblical justice and love, though they were condemned by many of their contemporaries. Conversely, the moderate majority who failed to take a strong stance in defense of the vulnerable were clearly wrong; what passed as patience and prudence is now seen to be moral lethargy or cowardice. Christians in every age should learn the lesson that boldly standing with the marginalized against their oppressors amidst the confusion of historical tumult is the only option for followers of Jesus.

But this leaves open the question of method. *How* should Christian bear prophetic public witness when it is needed? Certainly, this should always be done in the pulpit, where the word of God must be allowed to speak to the pressing issues of the present hour. But I believe that Barth is right to say that the church's proclamation to

itself must be translated into responsible public proclamation in the language of the world. Christians may begin by speaking into ordinary channels of public discourse, which are ever-changing in our current media climate. At present, these include more traditional models such as op-ed pieces in local newspapers as well as new social media platforms, which, for better and worse, have become a major force in cultural change. However, in urgent times, speaking through standard media channels—whether traditional or new—will often be inadequate. In more-or-less democratic nations that protect the right of assembly, this is where the church's capacity to organize large numbers of people for moral causes becomes crucial, and the example of Civil Rights organizers becomes indispensable. Tools of nonviolent protest that have been used effectively by many Christian peace activists include such organized public actions as prayer pilgrimages and vigils, which have the advantage of being natural expressions of Christian faith, and which—if organized and executed effectively—can be a powerful method of public witness, putting the right kind of pressure on elected officials to act according to moral principles. Other tools of nonviolent resistance employed during the Civil Rights movement—such as sit-ins, boycotts, and symbolic acts of civil disobedience—can increase this pressure by disrupting economic activities or forcing the public to face the injustice of its own laws. The nonviolent aspect of such protests maintains the distinctiveness of Christian love, which aims at reconciliation and beloved community rather than the defeat and humiliation of one's enemies. But these tactics are also forms of coercive power. In democratic situations, they exert real economic and political pressure that can force oppressors to act against their own desires. Moreover, they are protected by law, which means that governing authorities may be forced to bear

their “sword” in defense of peaceful protestors, as was the case when the United States federal government sent a variety of troops and agents to protect Civil Rights demonstrators from the violence of local police. In the face of recalcitrant injustice, these methods remain forms of powerful love aimed at justice and peace.

4.15. The Creative Power of Love

The theological claim that unmerited, sacrificial love possesses creative power has ample empirical support. The stories of the American Civil Rights movement and the South African anti-apartheid movement are full of such evidence. In my own experience, however, the miracle of creation has mostly been visible on a more modest scale. I saw it in the life of an elderly woman named Lucile who began attending Christ Community Church several years ago. She grew up in south Oklahoma City when it was the poor white side of town. She lived through the Great Depression of the 1930s, during which time she scrimped and saved so that she could not only feed her family but also have something to share with any strangers who came by offering to do work around the house for food. Lucile’s people were hard-working people. They were models of the grit, determination, and tenacity of their generation. They were also racists, and Lucile was no exception.

From her angle on the world, things started going bad on the south side of town when the “colored people” showed up. Of course, from the standpoint of most historians, what she had witnessed was really the aftermath of “white flight.” Oklahoma City Public Schools were finally integrated due to a mandatory federal busing program in 1972, and more than 10,000 white students left the district over the next decade

(Rolland). Their families moved north, south, east, and west—anywhere to avoid participation in the realization of Martin Luther King Jr.’s dream. As the majority culture moved out of south OKC, property values dropped, business were abandoned, and the bottom fell out of the already-shaky economy. A few decades later—after an influx of immigrants from Mexico, which provoked more white flight—the community in which Lucile had carved out her life of pride and dignity during years of struggle had become known for gang violence, property crime, and failing schools. And she blamed the “colored people.”

But, for some reason, Lucile started coming to worship with the people of Christ Community Church a couple of Sunday mornings each month. Over time, new experiences and relationships started changing her perspective on the world. She heard sermons from Chauncey Shillow—a black man with a deep soul, a sharp mind, and an incredible ability to communicate—and this preacher also made a point to come talk to her whenever she showed up. I once walked up on her after the service while she was being hugged by another black man, this time a guy who grew up in the inner-city and probably looked more like her stereotypes. But, with his arm around her, he was saying, “You are such a sweet lady. You remind me of my grandma!” Lucile squirmed in this holy embrace and said, “Actually, I’m a pretty cranky old woman.”

The turning point came a few weeks later with Joseph. While walking from her car to the front door of the school where Christ Community Church meets, Lucile tripped. She fell face-first into the pavement. When she started to get up, blood was streaming from her face. One of the greeters standing at the front door was a young man named Joseph. He’s a guy who didn’t fit any of Lucile’s categories. He’s tall, incredibly

strong, black, gentle, smart, soft-spoken, an athlete, and a voracious reader. And he was in the parking lot helping Lucile up in a matter of seconds. Joseph didn't think twice before helping Lucile. To him she wasn't so much a slowly-reforming racist as a human being who tripped in the parking lot. After helping her in, he found a paper towel to help her clean her face.

Lucile was never the same. When I visited her at home after this, she showed me a newspaper clipping about a black preacher that she had saved for me to read. This was her way of telling me that her heart had changed. She also wanted to know how Joseph was doing.

Joseph was doing fine, and his relationship with Lucile was one step on his own journey of transformation. He was practicing love, and he would need all the practice he could get. Over the next few years, Joseph was thrown into the fire of close relationships with openly racist people who were more resistant to the creative power of love than Lucile had been. But his heart had been formed, and he kept on loving. Over time, the number of white people whose lives were changed by knowing this man kept getting bigger.

Last summer, I walked in on a group of white college students at our community center as they huddled around Joseph. They were interns for a summer missions project hosted by our church, and they were full of questions about race and reconciliation. When I walked in, Joseph was explaining to them why he always tells little black girls in the community that their hair is beautiful. "The whole culture says they should want straight, blond hair. And there's a history to this." He pulled out a book about the political history of African American hair, and then continued. "So, I try to play with

their braids and tell them it looks nice. I want them to know that they are beautiful just the way that God has created them.” For the rest of the summer, I watched those energetic young white women play with the hair of little black girls and teach them that they are made in the image of God. Their lives will never be the same, and neither will the young girls whom they learned to love in the way that Joseph taught them. This is beloved community.

5. Conclusion: Twenty Principles of Peacemaking

This dissertation begins with the statement that disciples of Jesus are peacemakers (Matt. 5:19; Jas. 3:8), and I am now in a position to summarize what this means for the church in the twenty-first century. In the Christian scriptures, “peace” does not signify a mere absence of hostilities. Rather, it is the presence of joy and wholeness, the flourishing of all creation, and the loving communion of humans with God and one another. To be a peacemaker, then, is more than mediating or resolving conflict. Making peace means participating with God in the redemption of all things. It requires Christians to expose and oppose evil as it is everywhere manifest, not only in the souls of individuals, but also in the public, social life of humanity. The peacemaking vocation of the church thrusts it into the thick of the world’s affairs. The church cannot be faithful to Jesus while withdrawing from the pain and violence, suffering and misery that characterize so much of human history. In any case, the church could not take itself out of the world even if it wanted to, for the church is a part of the world, the part that confesses its guilt and complicity in the world’s brokenness and then casts itself upon the grace of God in Christ. This faith in divine grace is not a way of escape. The grace of God sends the church into the world’s pain, where it must learn to suffer, weep, and die with Jesus for the life of the world. It is those who grieve for the pain and evil of the world to whom Jesus promises comfort (Matt. 5:4). It is those who hunger and thirst for the righteousness of God to be manifest in the world—for God’s will to be done on earth as it is in heaven—to whom Jesus promises satisfaction (Matt. 5:6; 6:10). By joining Jesus in the public ministry of healing and restoration, the church becomes a sign that God’s peaceable kingdom has come near.

To make peace in the real world requires both wisdom and creativity. It necessitates deep theological roots, historical awareness, and sensitivity to the particulars of cultural context. The wisdom required for peacemaking cannot be gained by isolated reflection alone, though such reflection has an important role to play. Rather, the daily struggles of the church are the furnace in which theological wisdom is forged. Christians learn the principles and practices of peacemaking by participating in the life of the praying, preaching, singing, and serving communion of saints as it “suffers blows” on the path of discipleship.

In this dissertation, I have made an effort at second order reflection with the goal of thinking through and setting forth in a coherent fashion the principles and practices of peacemaking. This process of “thinking through” has involved drawing upon scripture and major voices in the theological tradition as well the writings of exemplary modern peacemakers and contemporary cultural theorists, both secular and religious. I do not present my findings as the last word on the matter. Indeed, all Christian theologizing is a provisional effort to reflect upon and respond to Christ—God’s first and last Word to the world—with the hope that others will come along to refine, develop and correct what has been said.⁸¹ But neither do I present these findings as mere ideas for intellectual consideration. They are, in reality, my effort to evaluate and articulate the convictions that guide and animate real people who are engaged—

⁸¹ On this point, Karl Barth writes in *Dogmatics in Outline* that theology “will always be able to fulfill its task only in accordance with the state of the Church at different times. . . . It will never be able to do this perfectly, Christian dogmatics will always be a thinking, an investigation and an exposition which are relative and liable to error” (11.) Consequently, he adds that the theologian “who is faithful in this task will hope that those other, later men may think and say better and more profoundly what we were endeavouring to think and to say” (11). I would add that later men and women do not always have to come *much* later, nor do the revisers of inadequate theology have to be *other* than those who wrote it. Augustine’s *The Retractions* is an illustrative model of a theologian making an effort to “think and say better” than he himself had previously said.

however imperfectly—in the work of peacemaking, including the people of Christ Community Church in Oklahoma City.

These convictions are concerned both with theology and ethics, theory and practice. Some of the principles enumerated are matters of doctrine: claims about God and God’s acts that emerge from reflection upon scripture and the Christian theological tradition. Others principles are more concerned with contextually specific praxis, which, by their very nature would need to be re-worked for different contexts. For example, many of the tactics of nonviolent resistance to structural evil that I mention are dependent upon a democratic context in which the freedom to peaceably protest is protected. Christians in less open societies would obviously have to improvise wise strategies to engage social evils that are shaped by the challenges and opportunities of their situations.

Principles of Christian Peacemaking

1. The God who discloses himself to the world in Jesus Christ is love. “Love” describes the life of God *ad intra*: the eternal communion of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. “Love” also describes the triune God’s acts *ad extra*: the history of God’s creating and redeeming work that is borne witness in the Old and New Testaments of Christian scripture and direct the church today.
2. God’s acts of creative and redemptive love move the world from chaos to wholeness in which each part of creation thrives in its own freedom while remaining bound to the rest of creation and to God in covenantal relations of peaceful difference. The Hebrew term *shalom*—which can be rendered “peace,”

“prosperity,” or “wholeness”—names this comprehensive flourishing, which is the end towards which God’s creative and redemptive work is ordered.

3. Human beings bear the image of God, which entails innate relationality as well as unique capacities for loving communion with God and for participation in God’s work of moving the world towards *shalom*. As vice-regents and stewards of the Creator’s world, humans express the *imago Dei* in part by creatively cultivating the latent potentialities of the world in fulfillment of the “cultural mandate.”
4. Evil is a privation of the good that God intends for his creation. Human evil—sin—is a turning from God to lesser goods, a disordering of thoughts, affections, and actions. Sin alienates human persons from God and one another. It also disrupts and distorts humanity’s vocation as vice-regents and stewards in the world. Sin vandalizes *shalom*. Sinful humanity uses its powers in a way that is destructive of itself and the world, producing pain and chaos instead of joy and peace.
5. Though the doctrine of “original sin” teaches that every aspect of human nature is affected by humanity’s turning from God to lesser goods, the image of God remains the essence of humanity. This image is badly disfigured but not destroyed, which is why humans have a tremendous capacity for doing good as well as a tendency to revert to violent and destructive behaviors. Humanity is God’s marred masterpiece. Because the *imago Dei* suffers pervasive privation, human beings yearn for good but are unable to rescue themselves from their own competing inclinations towards evil.

6. While “radical evil” does not exist, it is closely approximated by the desire for absolutely unhindered expression of individual will. All of reality (not only external reality, but also the individual’s own layers of conscious and unconscious desire) places limits upon the achievement of human desire, which means that destroying all barriers to individual will would mean destroying everything that exists. The impulse towards a radical form of individual autonomy —“negative liberty”—carries within itself the seeds of annihilation. Negative liberty cannot provide the sole basis for a free and just social order in which human beings may flourish. While this impulse to complete autonomy remains a disordered desire for a lesser good, relative autonomy—the freedom of individual wills from all *arbitrary* restraints—is an aspect of the divine image in humanity.
7. The spiritual discipline of lament—which is deeply rooted in the Christian scriptures—is a way of naming and grieving for the presence of evil in the world, including its presence in the church and in oneself. This is a form of cultural criticism that is both intellectually and existentially engaged, consisting not only of disinterested commentary but also of a deep and personal repudiation of the evils that are named. Yet biblical lament is always seasoned with hope. To name the world’s evil is to declare that things are not the way they ought to be, the way that God intends them to be. But the God whose will is violated is both sovereign and gracious, which means that evil will not have the last say in the world. God will accomplish his purposes for his creation. By grieving for evil, Christians also re-center themselves in trust of God and God’s promises. In so

doing, they take the first step towards both repentance and the constructive work of righting the world's wrongs.

8. The concept of justice in the Western philosophical tradition is generally understood to mean "allocating to each his own," with a strong emphasis upon treating individuals according to their merits, but this understanding of justice differs significantly from the biblical tradition. In scripture, living with "righteousness and justice" essentially means living in a way that is conducive to communal flourishing. While this does include treating people *at least as well* as they merit, it also means acting with mercy and generosity, which involve treating people better than they deserve. The emphasis in biblical justice is placed upon righting social wrongs, especially by protecting and empowering vulnerable members of the population, such as widows, the fatherless, immigrants, the poor, and the disabled. The ultimate goal is a community in which every individual can thrive and all persons are bound together in relationships of mutual respect and care. This is to say, doing justice aims at *shalom*.
9. To do justice depends on a positive vision of communal flourishing. This positive vision is the end towards which all just acts are ordered. Unlike various utopian social engineers, Christians should not imagine that they have achieved a final and complete vision of what a flourishing community should be. The human capacity to envision *shalom* is limited both by creaturely finitude (we are always seeing reality from a socially and historically contingent standpoint that necessarily precludes the visions seen from other standpoints) and by sin (we are

always seeing reality in a way that is shaped by our own disordered desires). Consequently, the task of envisioning better worlds—which I call the discipline of prophetic imagination—must be pursued communally. This discipline is rooted in the scriptural tradition, where the prophets and apostles give beautiful, though incomplete, witness to the possibilities of peace and joy in God’s new creation. The process of reflecting on how such visions could be approximated in history must be dialogical. It entails disciplined listening, attuned to the voices of people in other times and places, with a special attention to those who are vulnerable, marginalized, and oppressed. Through such a processes, tentative visions of better worlds may be cultivated to inspire and direct redemptive action. The discipline of prophetic imagination is a counterpart to the discipline of lament. Whereas lament names the world’s brokenness, prophetic imagination dreams of a world that is whole and the makes these dreams public.

10. Doing justice involves correcting social evils and pursuing *shalom* through deeds of judgment and grace. “Judgment” refers to acts of coercive power by which evil is restrained. A serious theology of sin requires Christians to remain open to the necessity of coercive power to curtail the destructive actions of recalcitrant oppressors. In particular, scripture teaches that various forms of civil authority are permitted by divine decree to wield coercive power for this negative purpose of restraining wrongdoers. Christians should encourage authorities to deal with social evil that is shaped by a “restorative justice” framework, which emphasizes restitution for social harm inflicted upon other persons rather than punishment for crimes against the laws of the state.

However, the coercive force of civil authorities does not have the positive power to bring about reconciliation or create *shalom*. A greater, more redemptive power is manifest in grace. Acts of generosity, self-giving love, and forgiveness have the creative power to overcome evil with good and restore *shalom* at the levels of individual and social life. Justice and love are cooperative and intrinsically related to one another.

11. The cornerstone of Christian social ethics is love, and Christians believe that the meaning of love is disclosed at the cross, where God's eternal nature as triune love is most fully expressed in self-giving grace towards humanity. Through the death of Jesus, God bears the judgment that is humanity's due, thereby creating the possibility for reconciliation between God and humanity on the basis of grace alone. At the cross, Jesus displays a love that is free, gratuitous, self-sacrificial commitment to the good of others, irrespective of the other's merits or deserts.
12. The love of God poured out on the cross calls for a response of repentance and faith. This response entails turning towards God, entrusting oneself to divine mercy, and thereby learning to love the God who first loved humanity. Though God is without needs, Jesus Christ presents himself in the needs of other humans, and thus the free and grateful response of Christians to God is expressed in sacrificial commitment to the wellbeing of others. Such love is directed towards the church, where Christians learn to live as a community of love. The church's ministry of word and sacrament, like all of its communal life, aims to cultivate the virtuous habits of love, whereby its members worship

Christ by caring for one another. The love that is practiced and cultivated within the community of Christians is extended outward to include all people. Thus Christians come to love their enemies after the manner of Christ's love for sinners: freely, gratuitously, and creatively. Such love does not hide or affirm evil. Rather, it exposes and confronts evil in a manner that calls for repentance with the ultimate goal of reconciliation. This outward-looking, active love of Christians is the basis and motivation for the church's mission to the world.

13. At the center of the church's mission are the ministries of evangelism (in which God graciously offers reconciliation to a broken humanity through the church's proclamation of Jesus Christ, crucified and risen) and nurture (in which God's cultivates the habits and dispositions of love in Christians through their communal practices of word, sacrament, and mutual care). But a church that relegates its ministry to inward-focused nurture combined with word-based attempts to evangelize outsiders has failed to understand the public and embodied nature of Christian confession. Through words and actions, the church lives in the world as a sign of the peace of Christ, an embodied witness that the kingdom of God has come near. This public, embodied aspect of Christian faith can be fleshed out according to the pattern of four biblical paradigms, summarized in principles 14-17.

14. *The church can actively equip and support individual members to work redemptively within the broken structures of contemporary society.* In every sphere of human social life, Christians have the opportunity to use their individual influence creatively in ways that counteract injustice and cultivate

human flourishing. In particular, churches should provide theological vision and practical support that encourage members to use their God-given capacities in intentional ways within spheres that have a major influence on human flourishing. Rather than demeaning such work as “worldly,” churches should actively encourage Christians to work towards *shalom* in fields such as education, criminal justice, law, business, government, and entrepreneurship. The fact that these areas of society are frequently characterized by greed, inequity, and exploitation makes it all the more important for Christians to embody a countercultural way of working within these spheres that seeks the common good—with special attention given to vulnerable groups—even when doing so requires considerable self-sacrifice.

15. *The church can find creative ways to embody an alternative polis that remains within the dominant culture while being formed by a radically different set of narratives and values.* Christian communities can choose voluntarily to organize their common life in manner that is not encouraged by the structures of the wider culture in which they dwell. Particularly when ethnic and socio-economic reconciliation is pursued within and between local congregations, the church can become a powerful vehicle for resource-sharing, mentorship, education, networking, and institution-building with the goal of making sure that all members—especially those who are in vulnerable social situations—have access to the resources they need to thrive. These creative practices can be directly sponsored by local churches, and they can be carried out by networks of individuals and institutions that are encouraged and supported by local churches.

16. *The church can sacrificially share its resources to bless and protect the most vulnerable members of the communities in which it is located.* At their best, such efforts should take an approach that is focused more on sustainable, assets-based community development than needs-based community service.⁸² Listening to and empowering those members of the community whom the church seeks to help should be a top priority, and churches should identify, encourage, and develop indigenous leaders from within at-risk communities. These principles help churches avoid well-intended but counter-productive “mercy ministries” that create long-term codependency, while assuring that church resources are used in a way that helps build local communities in which all God’s image bearers can thrive.

17. *The church can bear prophetic witness to those in positions of power by challenging dehumanizing ideologies, promoting a biblically-informed vision of comprehensive human flourishing, and defending the cause of those who are most vulnerable or exploited.* In addition to local community development, the church should raise its voice and exert influence in relation to larger-scale issues of systemic injustice. In the United States, this currently includes such issues as educational inequity, the mass incarceration of ethnic minorities, and the exploitation of migrant laborers. On an international level, issues such as ecological stewardship, war, and ethnic cleansing come into view. In addition to contacting government leaders directly and engaging in public civil discourse

⁸² Needs-based service seeks to ameliorate the suffering in at-risk communities by giving outside resources to hurting people, whereas assets-based development invests in indigenous leaders and develops local strengths, with a goal of making outside resources no longer necessary. The former is necessary in many crisis situations, but it can easily become destructive if it is not supplemented by an emphasis upon the latter.

through a variety of media outlets, the church can learn from the Civil Rights movement (and related movements across the globe) the tactics of nonviolent direct action, which seek to expose evil and put pressure on those in positions of power through peaceable means. Prayer vigils and pilgrimages provide a starting place for such organized, collective action. These efforts have the advantage of being closely connected to the church's daily practices of worship, preaching, and prayer, and they can be a powerful means for publicly staking out the moral high ground on pressing social issues. When more pressure is needed to resist recalcitrant forms of oppression, tactics such as boycotts, sit-ins, and various forms of civil disobedience may be employed. Such measures have a goal of conversion and persuasion, but they also possess coercive force that can pressure power holders to act rightly, even against their desires.

18. For the Christian peacemaker, all efforts to confront evil and cultivate *shalom* should be pursued in humility. Christians begin not by denouncing the evil that is present in the outside world, but the evil that lurks within the self and the church. By continually confessing their sins and reconstituting their communion with God and one another on the basis of God's grace in Jesus Christ, Christians should oppose every form of arrogance and self-righteousness that would undermine the moral and spiritual power of the church's witness. The fight for *shalom* within the souls of individual disciples and within their life together as a church must continually accompany the fight for *shalom* in the world.
19. For the Christian peacemaker, real evils and real enemies must be acknowledged and opposed in a spirit of love. A perverse form of love that fails to see, name,

and oppose the realities of oppression and oppressors will ultimately perpetuate social evil. Such “unjust love” is not love at all. Conversely, a commitment to oppose evil that dehumanizes the perpetrators of evil will prolong cycles of hatred and violence while rendering the proponents of justice incapable of seeing themselves or their enemies clearly. Such “unloving justice” will never produce positive peace. Rejecting both of these inadequate alternatives, those who would promote *shalom* must name and resist evil while hoping, praying, and working for the redemption of their enemies.

20. Christian peacemaking is emboldened by a hope that transcends death. While the church should be deeply concerned with the proximate goals of human flourishing on earth and in history, its ultimate hope is the reconciliation of all things in Christ. It seeks the *shalom* of earthly cities while confessing that it has no lasting city on earth, but waits eagerly for a city that is founded and built by God. This hope is essential, because it sustains loving action even in the face of defeat and death. Such hope also guards the church against temptation to capitulate to the apparent demands of *realpolitik*, by which the church has been repeatedly lured throughout history to forsake its witness and join the world in its violent lust for power. Sustained by the hope of resurrection life in a new creation where God’s beloved community is perfectly and permanently established by Christ, disciples of Jesus gain the courage to keep walking in the path of love, which always leads them to the cross.

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