

What is Evangelical Theology's Problem with Justice?

MS – Welcome, thanks for coming, what we're doing – pray

MS – Yannick, why don't you tell us a little about why you have a passion for this subject?

YCH - I think I have a passion for this really for a few reasons. Firstly, I am concerned with justice. I have had the privilege of living in a few different countries. And part of being in a country is learning the history and part of the history always involves the history of injustice. And in particular, the history of justice around race issues has been something that has concerned me for a while. I remember learning about civil rights history growing up. I had the opportunity to live in Birmingham, Alabama for three and a half years and it was eye-opening to see the issue of injustice in that city.

But secondly, I am an evangelical. I am firstly a Christian but I am evangelical. In spite of the baggage of the term, it is a term I believe is helpful and a good summary of what the Bible teaches. It is a good heritage with much to commend. I am a part of the FIEC, right? But as I looked at history, I was disturbed by something of a pattern of evangelicals struggling with major justice issues. And I don't think I am the only one. I think a number of younger people growing up in evangelical settings are dismayed at what they see as an endemic issue that evangelicalism has with justice. I think much of the reason why younger evangelicals are holding more tightly to Critical Race Theory or leaving evangelicalism and sometimes even the faith is because of a despair in evangelicalism to deal well with justice issues. People feel compelled to go outside of evangelicalism in order to deal well with justice. I fear that unless we deal with this issue squarely we will see more people who love Jesus who feel compelled to leave evangelicalism and I fear that this will mean going away from core truths of the Gospel.

Lastly, as I have thought about this, it seems to me at least that much of the issue with justice and evangelicals historically, has much to do with the way we do theology. It is not that we are embarrassed by it or don't care about it. It is more I think that there are ways in which we do theology that are great, but leave us with blind spots that lead us to struggle with dealing with justice issues. We want to be faithful to God and do justice and yet there are ways in which our theology I think causes us to struggle with justice. And so I am hopeful if we

can be more reflective on what these things are, we can think about justice a bit more carefully and do it better.

MS – How do you understand the biblical language/demand for ‘justice?’

YCH – It is a concern for equity and fairness. More importantly, justice, I think biblically, and I found you so helpful for this in our conversations, is the answer to this question: what do I owe my neighbour under God? What does God require from me in my relation to my neighbour? That goes beyond the issue of fairness and balance and speaks to what God demands from us in our relation to others. It is that famous verse Micah 6:8: **He 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?**

MS – As we talked this through we kept returning to some ‘accepted divorces’ in some evangelical theologies . . . can you give a few examples, which we’re going to explore more?

YCH – Creation and fall, original sin and innocence, personal and corporate sin, vertical and horizontal implications of justification, grace and reparation, love of neighbour and love of God.

MS – Ok, let’s work through some of those. Let’s start by thinking about why do you think many evangelicals are nervous of social justice – what are the things that we *should* actually be wary of?

YCH – There are some people who would say that there is nothing to fear. That all the concerns that evangelicals raise in the issue of social justice are just bogeymen who don’t exist. But I think that is clearly untrue. In this issue, as in many others, we should fear worldliness. There is an approach to justice in the world that ignores the God of justice. It is based in self-righteousness and is fueled by vengeance. It is a justice that acts as if justice is entirely in our hands and there is no God. But again the reason why evangelicals are so tempted by this I believe is because we have not shown to be able to robustly do justice which flows from our theology.

MS – if we're thinking about our doctrine of creation and fall, how does that shape our thinking about justice issues

YCH – So this is a good example of evangelical emphases that can create blind spots that make it more difficult for us to do justice well. Evangelicals, are the product of the Reformation. And one of the glorious and most central truths that the Reformers recovered was a robust understanding of the severity of the Fall and its effects. In response to Roman Catholic theology that was keen to emphasise the goodness of creation even after the Fall, the Reformers tended to stress just how devastating and comprehensive the effects of the Fall. The reason why this was so important was because the Roman Catholic Church underemphasised the reality of the Fall in order to have a greater place for human righteousness. But the Reformers, and in particular the REformed stream, stressed the extent to which the Fall had so corrupted creation so as to render us utterly incapable of true righteousness. So let me read a quote from Calvin, who in some ways did modify his views later. He says this about the image of God: **Although we grant that the image of God was not utterly effaced and destroyed in Adam, it was, however so corrupted that any thing which remains is fearful deformity.**

The unintended consequence of this, which is an elevation of the doctrine of the Fall, and perhaps an underplaying of the doctrine of creation and the goodness of creation and in particular, man in the image of God is that as evangelicals we tend to have an underdeveloped theology of creation and humanity in the image of God. Although it is true, evangelicals are growing in this, that has been our legacy. The reason why this affects justice is because so much of our passion for and understanding of justice derives from our understanding and appreciation of the dignity of man as made in the image of God. Man, even as sinners, are still made in God's image and that is the reason why injustice is such a weighty thing. Injustice against any person is an attack on someone who is made in God's image. And yet one of the reasons, I think why we have struggled in this as evangelicals is because historically we have had a weak doctrine of the image of God which comes out of a right concern to appreciate the significance of the Fall but I think at times at the cost of the doctrine of creation which affects how we think about justice.

MS – Do you think we conflate issues around original sin and innocence and what are the ways that this plays out?

YCH - So this is very much related to the above point. Evangelicals as children of the Reformation have a strong emphasis on the Fall and in particular on original sin. The Reformers here were really recovering old truths and in particular recovering Augustine. And one of the things that we learn in original sin is that ever since Adam sinned in the garden, we are all born as guilty sinners who justly deserve condemnation. In the language of Ephesians 2, we are born dead in sin and children of wrath. We are born guilty. Evangelicals have tended to hold to both original sin and original guilt. Not only are we sinners from birth, but we are guilty from birth and that is clearly what the Scriptures teach. However, if we are not careful we can forget that we have to think of guilt in at least two ways. There is the guilt we have before God because of our sin that means that we deserve hell. That is true. And yet that does not mean that there is no sense in which we can be innocent. A person who is a guilty sinner before God can still yet be innocent in a particular matter. They may suffer innocently, unjustly in the sense that they are innocent. So to use a clear example, a person who is murdered during a robbery is innocent. Yes of course, apart from Christ they are guilty before God and yet in the matter of their murder they are innocent.

The failure to distinguish these things I think is behind the evangelical uneasiness with passages in the psalms where the psalmist declares his innocence, his blamelessness in his suffering. We struggle because we tend to conflate all issues of innocence. It appears like David is saying that he is sinless. Like David, don't you know that you are a guilty sinner who deserves nothing but hell? How dare you speak of your innocence? But again that is to conflate issues of original sin and the matter of innocence.

The reason why this matters is because we cannot do justice well if we do not appreciate that people are innocent and suffer as innocents. A number of years ago, there was a statement on social justice that caused a big stir. It was written by evangelicals and embraced by many evangelicals. And in one of the explanations of the statement, Justin Peters, one of the authors said that actually the only justice we deserve is the justice we don't want. In the context of discussing justice and how that play in society, his response was that if we want to talk about justice, the only justice we deserve is actually condemnation from God. Actually, anything we have in this life is better than what we deserve because we deserve judgement. Although in one sense that is true, that makes it

impossible to deal with justice issues because we do not properly appreciate and have sympathy for those who are innocent.

MS – Let's think about our doctrine of salvation. How do we perhaps need to expand our thinking about horizontal implications of justification?

YCH – Well this is something that has come up more recently with the issue of the New Perspective on Paul. Now, I don't intend to summarise that debate in any way. And I should say that I have significant concerns with the New Perspective on Paul. However, one thing that I think that the New Perspective has rightly shed a light on is a lack of appreciation of the horizontal implications of justification. Okay let me take a step back. So justification is a central, you might say the central doctrine of evangelicals. This flows straight out of the Reformation. Luther said: **Because if this article [of justification] stands, the church stands; if this article collapses, the church collapses.** And I think this is absolutely right. Justification is central to our faith, the hinge on which salvation turns as Calvin said. In particular, the Reformers and then evangelicals have stressed how justification by faith tells us all about how we are made right with God. In other words, we have stressed the vertical implications of justification by faith.

But I think this means we have deemphasised the horizontal implications of justification. It seems to me that most, if not all, the times the issue of justification is discussed in Scripture it is with horizontal concerns at the front of mind. That is particularly true in Galatians and Philippians. Justification is about how we are made right with God. But primarily the Bible raises this issue in order to make the case that because we are justified by faith, therefore we can all equally be part of the people of God. Both Jews and Gentiles together as part of the people of God. So Paul brings up justification because Peter moves tables to stop eating with the Gentiles. Justification is about the unity of the people of God on the basis of faith. And that has massive implications for justice.

Perhaps the greatest example of this is Jim Crow. Evangelical churches in the South, which prized justification, and spoke about justification in ways that we love and learn from had segregated churches. Churches that understood justification and prized justification would not allow black people to join their churches. That speaks to a fundamental issue with how evangelicals have understood justification. And although a minority of evangelicals did have issue

with this, it was typically not phrased as a denial of the doctrine of justification as it should have been.

And even today, as evangelicals we don't often think of the integration of God's people as a fruit of justification, but we should. We still have largely have segregated churches, for different reasons sure but they are. And we don't tend to think of what that means for justification by faith. But I think that is because we have inherited an understanding of justification that has misunderstood the horizontal implications of this precious doctrine.

MS – How does thinking about our responsibility in corporate (not just individual) terms help us as churches?

YCH – Well again, I think there is an evangelical emphasis here that is good and comes out of Scripture but that if left unbalanced leaves a significant blind spot. Evangelicals have traditionally stressed that we live not just a society or in groups but as individuals. Evangelicals have a tradition that stresses us as individuals. You as an individual are guilty before God. You are liable before God. You must be born again. It doesn't matter if your parents are Christians or you are part of a Christian community you as an individual will stand before God. You as an individual will give an account before God. You must have a personal relationship with God. That is one of the emphases of evangelicalism and I think . We therefore think in terms of sin with reference to the individual in the language of Ezekiel 18: **The soul that sins must die.** And that comes out of the Bible. The Bible teaches all of that. However, if we only think of responsibility and sin in terms of individuals, we will be unable to think through justice properly. Justice demands that we think of sin and rectifying sin not just in terms of individuals but also systems. But if we only think of individuals our attempts at justice, however well intentioned will be anaemic.

Again, segregation in America is a good case study. We know that many evangelicals were sadly actively racist and opposed the civil rights movement on that ground. But what is striking is that even the evangelicals who were most sympathetic to the civil rights movement and were against racism, were typically opposed to any kind of systemic change. The problem was just individual racists who needed to repent and change for justice to be done. Individual racists could be punished even but they were against any systemic change to bring this about. So for example, the most sympathetic evangelicals were nearly all against any forced desegregation of schools. And I don't think

that is unique to America decades ago. As evangelicals we tend to stress that we live as individuals but this can lead to a blindness to the problems of system.

A great case study can be seen in Scripture. In Acts 6, we read that there was a dispute in the early church because the Hellenistic Jews complained that they were widows were being discriminated in the distribution of the food. I wonder if this issue came up in your church, and you had some power in the decision what you would do. I think we probably wouldn't introduce a systemic change. I think we would struggle to do that. To be honest, I think we can struggle to even think of Hellenistic widows or Jewish widows as a group. We are more comfortable in terms of just thinking of them as individuals. But the Bible doesn't do that. The Bible recognises them as a group and the apostles introduce a systemic change to bring about justice. They introduce deacons to distribute it, in order to overcome the issue of injustice. They don't try and investigate and get rid of the racist distributors. It may be that there was nothing even intentional in the discrimination. No, they introduce a systemic change. And it works! The issue is resolved and the Bible tells us that the word of God continued to increase!

This is so vital because it seems to me that many of the justice issues that we have, including things like abortion and sexual abuse and so on will require systemic change. But if we don't think in those categories, then even our best efforts to help will prove ultimately unhelpful.

MS – How does our understanding of what grace is and reparation into all of this?

YCH – Okay, so this will be our last one before we look super briefly at some practical considerations. Once again, it is important to say that as evangelicals we are children of the Reformation. One of the things that the Reformation was recovering is that we have forgiveness with God not by works but by free grace. We do not work for our forgiveness. It is the gift of God. We do not in any way work for our forgiveness. We do not pay penance. Forgiveness is the free gift of God which reconciles us to God. We are therefore suspicious of anything that makes repentance or even reconciliation dependent on works. We are suspicious of anything that smells of penance or works righteousness.

However, in that we can miss that there are fruits keeping with true repentance. We know that Zaccheus' repentance is genuine not just because he says he is sorry. No he says that if he has defrauded anyone, he would pay it back. He

would make restitution. This comes right out of Leviticus and Numbers. Justice requires restitution where possible. We are saved by free grace yes, through faith and repentance. But a repentance that refuses to make restitution where possible reveals itself to be a false repentance. That is not penance. That is just what repentance looks like. That is what justice looks like. If I steal £100 from you, and then I repent and ask God for forgiveness and I truly am repentant, then my sin is forgiven. But if I do not go on to repay that money, I reveal my repentance to be a sham, a faith without works which is dead. But I think as evangelicals because we have been so nervous of penance, we have not been robust on what reparation should look like and because of that we have not done justice well.

A good example of that is here in this country. One of the great heroes of justice in this country is William Wilberforce. He laboured tirelessly for the slave trade to be made illegal. One of the ways in which he achieved this was in money that was borrowed by the government to pay former slave owners in order to achieve this law. I think we just finished paying it in 2015. However, one thing is absolutely striking as you look back at it. Not one penny of this was given to the slaves themselves. Wilberforce wages this long war talking about the injustice of slavery, how it was against God and how it was immoral. How it was wrong. And he succeeds in changing public opinion. This thing is wrong. We should not have been doing this. And yet looked at slaves who had been in this unjust slavery all their life and their ancestors before them and said, look this was wrong, we are sorry and yet nothing was given by way of reparation. That is unjust. That is unjust. But I think that flows out of a poor understanding of reparations that I think comes out of our nervousness to preserve the freeness of God's forgiveness.

MS – What are some of the key issues you think the church ought to be more actively involved in and what might this look like in the local church?

YCH - First and foremost, I think this means that our local churches themselves treat people justly. One of the striking things about the scandals in the church recently, is that we do not seem to be able to do justice well amongst ourselves. The sexual abuse scandals, domestic abuse and the way it is handled in our churches and many more issues I think are signs that we are not getting justice right in our churches. I think the church has a voice and contribution to the world on this but we have to begin at home. What does it look like to do justice well in our own church? What are the ways in which we might better render to each other what God expects of us in our church? Before thinking about even our society, I think we need to think about our individual churches.

And then beyond that let's look in our societies. Are there health inequalities in our societies? We know that certain groups have far worse health outcomes in our country. What are ways we can step in? Are there things we need to advocate for? Particularly, is there systemic change that we can advocate for? Of course these things can be complex but we should be creative in how we try to bring about justice. I think we can do it in any number of ways but it starts with reflecting theologically on these things and then seeing how we can put it into practice.