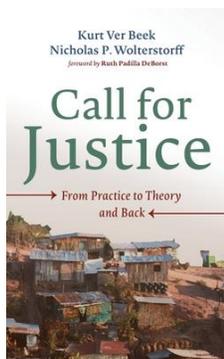


BOOK REVIEW

Call for Justice: From Practice to Theory and Back.

By Kurt Ver Beek and Nicholas P. Wolterstorff

Reviewed by Benji Moncivaiz



Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2019. \$26.00

In an exchange of letters between practitioner Kurt Ver Beek, co-founder of the Association for a More Just Society (ASJ), and philosopher Nicholas P. Wolterstorff, *Call for Justice* unpacks what it means to pursue justice by balancing examples of people doing justice work with the theoretical and theological frameworks that support it. The book primarily uses the work of ASJ in Honduras as its case study. Ver Beek presents the work of ASJ, and Wolterstorff comments on the philosophical and theological aspects of that work. Overall, the book makes a case to build up government systems, rather than simply pointing fingers or addressing brief episodes of need.

The book is divided into five sections. Though the concept of power is not directly acknowledged by the authors, it is the fundamental issue explored in the opening section about the role of missionaries, government, politics, and corruption in ASJ's work. The authors note that government is established as a gift from God to secure justice for its people. Understanding the fundamental identity of government as being good, Ver Beek explains three distinct roles present in ASJ's work with the Honduran government: prophet, priest, and king. Any Christian organization that works closely with government needs to be carefully inspected, and the trio of roles helps readers appreciate the delicate, multi-faceted balance ASJ strikes. By leaning on powerful, data-driven research,

ASJ mobilizes public pressure on the government by bringing injustices into the light, often critiquing the government's policies and/or behaviors. ASJ then stands alongside relevant government institutions to address these critiques, making no distinction or discrimination among political parties. This dual role of auditor and assistant to whichever party is in power is a unique approach to justice work that makes ASJ's model both confusing and special. ASJ helps the government perform its job better and create a stronger and more just Honduras. Unlike many Christian NGOs' approaches to development that focus on specific sectors of need, like economic empowerment, agriculture, education, or health, this book, and ASJ itself, begins by focusing on the deeper issues in a country, like the uses and abuses of political power.

The book moves on to consider the interaction between justice, love, and forgiveness. How can someone love their neighbor, one of our two greatest commandments, while at the same time demanding that people be punished for their wrongs, and simultaneously valuing the need for forgiveness? To walk us through this complex conundrum, Wolterstorff helpfully explains the difference between first-order justice - when we are in ordinary right relations to each other - and second-order justice - when an action is taken to address a violation of first-order justice. He goes on to explore the various ways to understand punishment's role within second-order justice - in retribution, reform, deterrence, protection, and as a public proclamation of what is right and wrong. Coupled with Ver Beek's follow up examples of when ASJ has simultaneously sought forgiveness and punishment, this discussion about justice and punishment helps readers better understand the relationship between punishment and forgiveness. The authors add that an emotional response is required for justice work. Empathy toward the person wronged is the first emotion required, but this alone is insufficient. If we are to be stirred to action, empathy must be accompanied by anger. Anger toward injustice is not only acceptable, but is actually as necessary as empathy. Ver Beek unpacks some of the nuances of these emotions and the role of forgiveness by sharing his own response to the murder of one of his friends and fellow

staff members, Dionisio. In a book about justice, it makes sense to include the role of emotion, but it is also a topic about which I wish the authors had taken more time to answer a few more questions: For example, where in Scripture do we see the necessity for, and limitations of, emotion? Can God use someone to fight for justice even if they are not angry?

The third section explores various theoretical pillars that support ASJ's approach and its on-the-ground strategies. Coalitions create credibility, strength, and a larger voice for diverse stakeholders who are then unified under a common goal. Wolterstorff argues that understanding justice through the lens and language of "rights" enables us to explain the aims of justice in more specific terms and explain why people become angry when they are linked with injustice. The section ends with an encouragement to maintain our vision of shalom - of peace and flourishing.

The fourth section explores ASJ's Christian identity, the Church, and its relationship to social justice. ASJ's vision is rooted in bringing about God's desire for shalom in the world. ASJ's staff and programs model the values that Jesus lived and taught. Ver Beek and Wolterstorff take turns exploring why the pursuit of justice has been met with resistance in the church - reasons that stem from different translations of the Greek word as "righteousness" rather than "justice," the perception that justice is supplanted in the New Testament by a different love and righteousness, and a conservative aversion to talking about people's rights, which seem to have liberal connotations. For those well-versed in philosophy and theology, the discussion here might seem overly simplistic, but for me, not having such a foundation, I found these chapters illuminating, because I learned how the Church should and can present a unified front in fighting for social justice.

The final section discusses how the ASJ model applies elsewhere, outside of Honduras. In some countries, a populism fueled by suspicion and resentment creates division between people and prevents a working relationship with government agencies. This challenges the ASJ model, which intends to strengthen and improve government bodies. The authors explain that while each context will demand modification of the model, one common feature in many countries is the likelihood of distrust in public institutions that leads to instability and weak systems of justice. It is thus possible generally to apply ASJ's basic model of gathering good evidence, publicizing it, holding government accountable, and also walking alongside government institutions to help them implement change. The book ends with a final call to build up and improve public institutions, rather than limiting ourselves to criticizing and tearing them down. Ver Beek notes that government employees are influenced by their environment and the nudges they

encounter every day; under certain conditions, many can be influenced to behave either ethically or corruptly. ASJ tries to create conditions that bring out the best in people. By so doing, it works to rebuild institutions to be healthier so that people have more reason to do the right thing, which ultimately leads to better government systems that are better able to care for everyone in the country.

While most books focus on either theory or real-life practice, this book does both. The authors' personal experiences with justice work, the breakdown of the ASJ model into its key parts, and integration of ASJ's work into larger global concepts of justice, rights, and other global movements successfully make a way for the lessons learned at ASJ to be applied on the global stage and in Christians' personal lives. The simultaneous exploration of the theory and practice of justice is useful for readers who want to become better informed on the promotion of justice from a Christian perspective. While the book's treatment of complex topics of punishment, rights, populism, and social justice is focused on the particulars of ASJ's work in Honduras, it nevertheless provides a general and helpful narrative that integrates these important Christian themes into a powerful analysis, thus providing readers with encouragement and a sense of direction.

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