

EXCERPT



## ***Becoming a Just Church*** *Cultivating Communities of God's Shalom*

February 12, 2019 | \$17, 224 pages, paperback | 978-0-8308-4151-6

# How Does Your Church Pursue Justice?

I don't think it comes as a surprise to note that the record on justice is spotty at best for white evangelicals. It has not been part of our normative framework for thinking about the gospel and the mission of the church. Beyond that, justice issues often get framed as *liberal*, making it difficult to have nuanced conversations about modern-day injustice at the level of the local evangelical congregation. In the main, the history of evangelicalism in the United States is evidence of our leeriness if not outright opposition to the pursuit of justice. In 1947, Carl F. H. Henry, the first editor of *Christianity Today*, lamented this reality: "It remains a question whether one can be perpetually indifferent to the problems of social justice and international order, and develop a wholesome personal ethics." Seventy years ago the problem of a disconnect between justice and the lived faithfulness of evangelicals in the United States was a most pressing concern. Sadly, not much has changed.

Our current reality is such that evangelical justice seekers have largely become a sidelined people. Most evangelicals who have a passion to seek the shalom of God in the world have found that their local congregation is indifferent or antagonistic to that desire. In some rare cases this congregational marginalization looks like an often-overlooked justice team, but that is probably an exception rather than the rule. The most likely scenario is that justice-minded evangelicals have learned that the local evangelical congregation is not a safe space to work out those passions.

It is not surprising, then, that this antagonism parallels the rise of evangelical parachurch organizations focused on issues of justice. Understandably these folks, feeling unwanted in local congregations, have increasingly gravitated toward the more proactive organizations and movements that have sprung up along the way both as a way of giving expression to their deepest passion and as a way of making sense of their understanding of Jesus.

Thus, most of the major justice initiatives of the last generation have been outsourced by the local church. Urbana Student Missions Conference, World Relief, World Vision, International Justice Mission, CCD, Sojourners, Evangelicals for Social Action are just a few of the incredibly powerful evangelical movements for justice that have generated enormous momentum and have helped mobilize a generation of Christians around the cause of justice.

If you spend much time in these circles, as I have, it is stunning to note how often people articulate a sense of family and homecoming when describing their experience of affiliation with these parachurch organizations. Over time, these groups have started to function as *ecclesia* (*church*) for the justice-minded Christians who have experienced displacement from congregational life. I suppose this is a kind of double-edged sword. On the one hand, I am thankful for groups that create the spaces for followers of Jesus to work out their worldview into action in a safe and supportive community.

On the other, isn't this reality a tragedy? Isn't the fact that these organizations function as safe havens *from the local church* a devastating critique of the kind of people we have become? Justice organizations play a valuable and needed role in the world without question, but I mourn the role they are also required to play in the lives of many justice-minded evangelicals today because it evidences the severe deficiency of our local, embodied ecclesiology related to justice.

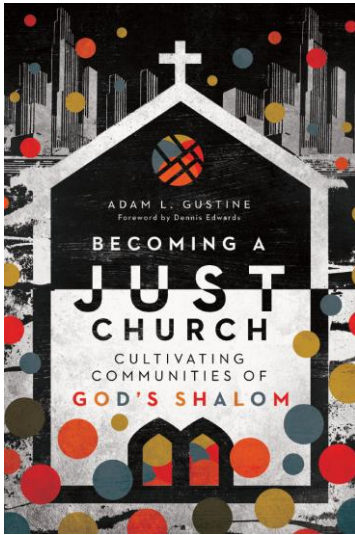


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*Becoming a Just Church* is not just a critique of the current realities. Instead, in this book I aim to offer a vision for how the local congregation might regain its foothold in the work of justice and the pursuit of God's shalom. In suggesting that there is a way forward, I suppose I am tipping my hand that I am an idealist when it comes to the local church. I cannot escape the reality that God intends for the kingdom mission to work in and through the church.

That the *missio Dei* extends into the world through the local church is an exceedingly common sentiment these days in evangelicalism. There is a danger here, namely, that saying so can actually function to allow us to perpetuate our evangelical status quo without careful examination and reformation. In many cases, I experience it to be the case that this belief works to cosign our brokenness rather than make our knees quake in fear that the God of all creation would intend to work out the purposes of cosmic reconciliation and renewal through us.

I contend that the way we resist allowing this theological reality to function like a cliché is to be rigorously committed to self-examination as we lean into the reality of being the primary instrument of God's purposes in the world today. If local expressions of the body of Christ are going to live into the fullness of God's vision for the church, specifically as it relates to the pursuit of justice, much will need to change. And it will probably start with repentance.

—Taken from the introduction

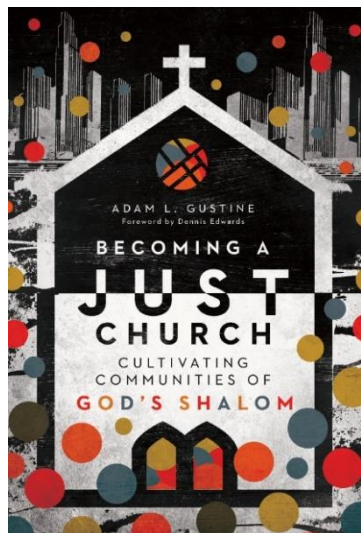


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## ***Becoming a Just Church*** ***Cultivating Communities of God's Shalom***

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Adam Gustine provides a theological vision for the church's identity as a just people, where God's character and the pursuit of shalom infuses every aspect of our congregational DNA. In this renewed vision, the church becomes a prophetic alternative to the broken systems of the world and a parable of God's intentions for human flourishing and societal transformation.

## **"God's church was always intended to be a vehicle for God's shalom."**

*"Adam Gustine has done the church in the United States a great service. Becoming a Just Church is one of those rare books possessing the potential to change the way we think about and do Christian ministry. . . . Becoming a Just Church provides both a theological framework as well as practical guidance on how followers of Jesus can live out the Great Commandment."*

—From the foreword by Dennis Edwards, senior pastor, Sanctuary Covenant Church

*"There is a generation of white evangelical Christians who are discovering God's beautiful and risky call to seek justice in this world. Unfortunately, many of these younger women and men were disciplined in churches where justice was viewed as being either tangential to the gospel or a threat to it. The result is that as they grow close to God's heart for justice, these young Christians often move away from church. Becoming a Just Church demonstrates how unnecessary the gap between justice and church is. Rather than being an impediment to justice, Adam contends that our congregations are meant to provide the spiritual formation that matures us into people who don't simply do justice but who are just. He has written a book that is wise and practical. If we let these pages shape our imaginations, it's possible that generations of Christians will mature within just congregations. And what a hopeful future that would be!"*

—David Swanson, pastor, New Community Covenant Church, Chicago

*"Becoming a Just Church offers us a beautiful and deeply biblical vision of the church as the primary conduit of God's shalom (justice, wholeness, and harmony) invading our broken world. As Adam Gustine humbly shares his own often-faltering journey in discovering the centrality of God's justice for the gospel, he insightfully exposes the various reasons why white American evangelicals in particular tend to overlook this biblical vision, misunderstand God's justice, and frequently end up inadvertently contributing to the very injustice we are supposed to be confronting. Becoming a Just Church is a well-written, eye-opening, paradigm-shifting, prophetic and pastoral work that has the potential to fundamentally transform the way readers—and especially white evangelical readers—think about church and engage with issues of justice. If you've ever sensed that the church should be a greater force for transforming society, read this book!"*

—Greg Boyd, senior pastor of Woodland Hills Church, president of ReKnew.org



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## ENDORSEMENTS



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Adam L. Gustine leads CovEnterprises, a social enterprise initiative of Love Mercy, Do Justice, for the Evangelical Covenant Church. He is also the founder of Jubilee Ventures, an enterprise incubator in South Bend, Indiana, dedicated to extending opportunity, restoration, and ownership to the margins.

Follow him on Twitter: @Adam\_Gustine.

*"Honestly, this book is now my top priority recommendation to every local church that is seeking to be faithful to God's call for justice. Clearly, we are living in a critical season, and the church needs to take action. But our paradigms for entering this work feel enshrouded in a thick fog of competing options and compartmentalized strategies. Adam Gustine is a prophetic guide for white Christians like me. He cuts to the quick and gets us focused back on first things first. This book leads straight to the root issues of justice, issues that begin with our own need to live out a communal alternative to the broken systems of the world. From this living 'demonstration plot,' we can become an authentic voice that extends God's justice out into the world in tangible ways. I hope churches, seminaries, and faith communities of every variation will buy this book in bulk, assign it for slow reflective reading, and follow it up with serious imaginative engagement."*

—Paul Sparks, coauthor of *The New Parish*, cofounding director of the Parish Collective

*"Becoming a Just Church isn't about ramping up your church's outreach activities, nor is it about the problem of injustice 'out there' that needs to be solved. It is about the church becoming who she was always intended to be by God's design: a people who reflect the shalom community of a triune God. Rooted in robust biblical theology that extends into a beautiful shalom-centered ecclesiology, anchored by stories from on-the-ground ministry to fuel our imagination, Adam Gustine draws from his pastoral experience and resources us with the practical wisdom we need to explore what it means to become a just church. Pastoral and prophetic in tone, this will be a gift for both pastors and laypeople alike in a time where we must all examine the question of what it means to be the people of God today."*

—Juliet Liu, copastor at Life on the Vine Church, editorial director at Missio Alliance

*"God's church was always intended to be a vehicle for God's shalom. And Gustine helps us dream new dreams about what a church that leans into this calling could look like. He exhorts communities to not just do justice but also to embody justice in all aspects of community life. A helpful resource for Christian communities wanting to embody God's shalom in the communities where they are placed."*

—Nikki Toyama-Szeto, executive director of ESA/The Sider Center

*"I know many Christians that have to find organizations outside of their church to join with others in seeking social justice. What I appreciate most in *Becoming a Just Church* is that Adam Gustine insists that, although no efforts toward true social justice are bad, the church is God's preeminent vehicle for bringing wholeness, reconciliation, redemption, and justice to the world."*

—Shane Blackshear, host of Seminary Dropout



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