

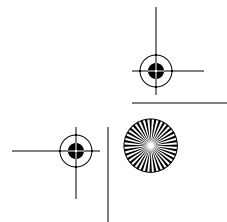
INTRODUCTION

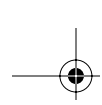
GETTING YOUR HOUSE IN ORDER

AS LONG AS I CAN REMEMBER, whenever I have heard Martin Luther King Jr.'s voice I have been compelled to listen. I have been unable to simply continue whatever I had been doing. One time, as I was walking up the stairs, a TV program began airing one of his speeches. After a while I realized that I had just stopped and was standing there, listening. Something about his words had such potency; something in them was inescapably real. Though by now I have heard some of his speeches many times, I am still drawn to quietness in the presence of those words.

I was first introduced to Jesus in the ninth grade. I attended a private school, and though the curriculum did not demand Christian faith, it did require that we study the Old and New Testaments with some thoroughness. My teacher was Mr. Starr, and over the course of the first semester I was captured by the Jesus he introduced me to in the Gospel accounts. I had read some of the stories before and had heard them in Sunday school since before I could remember. But here I felt I was seeing Jesus really for the first time.

To my surprise, it turned out that Jesus was a man of passion. He turned over the tables of a group of men handling currency exchange to





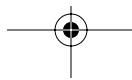
confront a corrupt religious and economic system. He hung out with the ordinary people of his day and chose them to be his most trusted friends. He noticed and spent time with people who were hurting, diseased, the kind of people who were unwelcome in polite society. He cared for those who were in need, and he called everybody to change their ways and cooperate with the government of God. He spent time with those who were considered sell-outs. And he taught with a sharpness, a clarity and a boldness that drew people to listen. He was provocative, dramatic, even sarcastic at times. He was a powerful voice for the way things should be in his time. He was such a threat to the people of power in his time that though he posed no threat of violence, they put him to death.

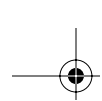
Before this experience, Jesus had seemed a bit dull to me—sort of blurred in all the grays of tame mediocrity. But now all of a sudden he was in full color, and I could hardly stop thinking about what I had seen. I was drawn to him, what his life was about, what he taught and how he taught it, what he did and how he did it. It was an amazing experience.

Not until my freshman year of college did I encounter this Jesus again; and to be honest, I had missed him. In between those times, I sat through a lot of sermons and Sunday schools, and many things we talked about in church didn't seem to matter much. It's still that way sometimes. The same Spirit of God that compelled Dr. King to preach and Mr. Starr to teach now compelled me to listen closely to Jesus' words. Jesus' life, and particularly his words, became powerful to me. King's dream was first Jesus' dream—Dr. King had simply applied it to his generation. Since this discovery, I continue to be drawn into quietness in the presence of Jesus' word.

THE DEBATE

Since I began following Jesus in a deliberate manner during my college years, I have found some discussions about the Bible frustrating. There has been a great deal of national and international debate and division concerning the place of evangelism and social concern. Some churches seem to focus so little on the social dimensions of the gospel, and others





focus on those dimensions exclusively. Some call us to personal righteousness but have little to say about social or corporate righteousness. Some want to talk about evangelism and sharing the good news but have nothing to say about concerns of substantive justice for individuals or groups. The dichotomy can be maddening for people who are awake to both what is happening in the world around us and the Jesus I met many years ago now.

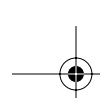
I grew up in a church context that spoke little about social concern but in a family that was keenly aware of social issues. As a young man, I was taught by my parents to respond slowly and carefully when a police officer stops you. I heard my family's stories about the segregated conditions they grew up in. I knew about some of my ancestors and their slavery in Virginia. We talked about the racial and class inequities in the United States and how some members of our family had been the first to make headway socially or economically in some profession. I learned certain parts of American history that were not included in school textbooks but were addressed in family letters and stories that had been passed down.

As I grew older, I learned more about injustice in society. I saw the homeless population explode as many mentally ill people were released onto the streets. I saw racial tension in the streets and in school. Some friends and I were threatened by a bunch of white guys at football games. There were racial slurs periodically. Yet in church we never even talked about race. Where was God in all this? What had happened to the Jesus I had met in ninth grade? What did the church have to do with these real issues?

Such questions rumbled around in me as I grew older, and only in college did I find the blended spirituality that the Scriptures commend to us and that Jesus demonstrated through his life. We are to be about both sharing the good news in word and living out our faith in good works, which express social concern.

Since then, God has called me to be a part of various Christian movements and churches, most of them strongly evangelical. I have still found





few communities that seem to integrate these elements of the gospel well. And until relatively recently, I've found little substantive concern for justice issues. So if you are concerned for justice and desire to understand how we might make this passion a central part of our Christian spirituality, you and I are on the same journey. But before I go on, let me tell you how I really feel about things.

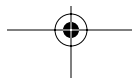
GETTING OUR HOUSE IN ORDER

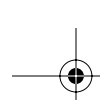
I have come to believe that the purpose of the church includes a mandate to care for the poor and to be involved in substantive justice work. We are to be Jesus' body, ministering to a world gone mad, with a particular concern for the poor.

As is always the case in following Jesus, as we do what he has instructed, we discover more of who he is and what he is doing in us and through us. We are changed as we hope for and pray for change in others and in society around us. We are called to be God's reminder to those who suffer in poverty and injustice that he has not forgotten about them. We are the physical expression of his love for them, his compassion and his desire to be with them. We are directly commanded in Scripture to have this type of presence, this type of ministry. We are to have a particular concern for the poor and needy in the world, those people without a voice, without power and without options. This concern is, as my book's subtitle suggests, off-center in a self-centered world.

This is not an issue just for the West or the United States, nor is it an issue only for wealthy believers. It is part of the ministry and purpose of the church across the board, regardless of economic status and area of the world. We are to be in solidarity, together, in this kind of ministry.

Yet I have found a curious thing in my years of following Jesus in the United States. Is it not curious that we spend so much of our church budgets on things that are simply not commanded in Scripture? Why is this? Countless (OK, hundreds) of passages in the Old and New Testaments directly command us to minister to the needs of the poor. We are commanded to spread the good news of the gospel to every people





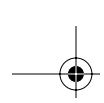
group, in every corner of the world. We are even commanded to support the work of those missionaries who do such things—who go on behalf of all of us who stay. And yet so much of our budget is consumed with the building fund, or building upkeep, or high-tech gadgets, or the band, or the organ—billions of dollars every single year. All of this for a God who says he will not dwell in a house made by human hands. How is it that we can spend millions of dollars on a new cathedral in a city where people have problems finding food to eat, clothes to wear and places to sleep? Now that is depressing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be so.

Surely it is not necessarily a problem to have a building or musical instruments. But it might be, and given our culture's seductive materialism and consumerism combined with the love of wealth, we should be *very* careful.

Personally, I am tired of the needless debates that have raged in the church in recent decades. Believers have argued and continue to argue about whether the gospel actually includes social action or is just about verbal evangelism and the saving of souls. Thankfully, in recent years there have been interdenominational movements that have affirmed that the gospel is about both. The Gospels show the Lord ministering to those in need as he taught about the kingdom of God. Ministering to those in need is not the whole gospel. Talking about the kingdom alone is equally pathetic. Scripture itself offers that the kingdom of God is not about mere talk (see 1 Corinthians 4:20). At the same time, social concern alone is an emaciated representation of what the healthy body of Christ should look like in action. Loving the poor is a demonstration of the gospel and is commended in many parts of the Bible, but this should be coupled with verbal witness, as the Scripture demonstrates.

The gospel has flourished in many countries. It has become a fire in many places around the world. And it has, through the generations, been a source of social transformation. The kingdom of God is about many things. It is about forgiveness; it is about character transformation; it is about purity in sexual relations; it is about compassion for those in





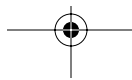
need; it is about healing; it is about declaring and demonstrating the good news to those who don't yet know.

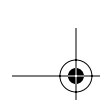
Let us never throw out that which is ours by design. We have been given no right to renegotiate the terms on which we will follow Christ. Nor have we been given the right to rewrite our marching orders—our constitution if you will. This is not a democracy where we can change the basics through a majority vote. The believing community is actually a monarchy—and there will always be but one King. Given this, we must receive whatever (and whoever) he says is part of his kingdom—no exceptions.

We may struggle, for such is our human condition and such is the testimony of the disciples who came before us. Even Peter, whom Jesus called the great rock of the church, the leader of the church in Jerusalem, struggled as he followed. Both before and after Pentecost he fought with his preconceived notions of what the kingdom and the gospel and Jesus were about. But God did not let him define the faith in whatever way he wanted. Jesus and his Spirit continued to work in Peter, as the Gospels and Acts record, to make him accept the full picture—without exceptions. Should we expect to have it easier than Peter did?

Peter's longest struggle was with the ethnic inclusiveness of the gospel. This is a major struggle in our day as well, though I will not address it in this book. Another of our difficulties is with our responsibility to those in need. The issue is holism: we should be concerned with the whole package, the whole gospel, and not just one or a couple of aspects of the faith.

In our day, how do we address the lack of concern for substantive justice and righteousness in the church, beyond certain popular public topics? What does it mean to *be* the message and not simply say it? It is my sincere hope that we shall come to terms with the whole of the gospel and see the kind of revival that many of us long for in the West. Indeed believers in other parts of the world long for a revival among us here, for they (more so than us) feel our shortcomings. And thus, with the encouragement of friends, I have written this exploration of what it will





mean for us to take seriously Scripture's call to justice, righteousness and concern for the poor.

A FEW NOTES ABOUT THE REST OF THE BOOK

Urban issues. Our world is becoming more and more urban, and at an alarming rate. This is true of people in general, but particularly true of people living in poverty. Poverty is thus becoming increasingly urban. For this reason, I believe we must focus on issues surrounding the urban poor. Poverty in less urban areas still needs to be addressed. But in this book, I will focus largely on poverty's urban face.

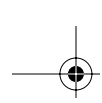
My point is not that every Christian needs to be living among the urban poor to minister the gospel. Some believers *should* be there, but there are plenty of places where a concern for the poor needs to take root. God will lead us where we need to be, and wherever we are, a concern for those in need should be a part of our spirituality.

Wealth issues. As you read the book, please keep in mind that when I speak of the community of faith, I mean both those who have substantial material resources and education and those who have little. The biblical command to be people of justice who have a concern for the poor is not addressed only to the wealthy. It is a command to the church. There is no room for class divisions in this discussion. God's people are to be concerned for the poor and seek to be of service. This will look different depending on what community of faith we are involved with and what resources we bring to the table, but all of us are to be committed together in ministering to those the world overlooks.

Furthermore, in regard to the call to care for the poor, I make no distinction between those who are in need who are believers and those who are not. Certainly the Bible tells us that we are to care for those in the community of faith. But we are also encouraged to love and care for *all* those in need. For the purposes of this discussion, I will make no effort to distinguish between these groups.

Style issues. The book includes sections that have a teaching orientation and others with a more sermonic, preaching tone. To be honest, I





find writing very frustrating because it is too stagnant. I cannot see the congregation, explain something further or interact about an idea with anyone. I prefer discussions in person.

You as a reader may be accustomed to an analytical, deliberate, nuanced teaching tone in literature and conversation. Or you may be refreshed by a more combative, prophetic, direct, impassioned oratorical tone in written work and preaching. In this book you will find both. I encourage you to let the different tones of writing be a sort of cross-cultural experience as the discussion develops. I speak and write in both styles.

The following pages invite you on a tour through some of the passages I have found helpful, as well as through some reflections on society. Chapters addressing the biblical basis for ministry that involves concern for the poor lead into an examination of the varied categories of justice ministry and how they work together. Finally, a few chapters look at some of the difficulties we will face and provide counsel about maintaining spiritual integrity. Stories, examples and ideas are integrated throughout.

At times I am critical of what I see in the Western church. But Martin Luther King Jr.'s eloquent words explain this better than I could on my own: "In deep disappointment, I have wept over the laxity of the church. But be assured, my tears have been tears of love. There can be no deep disappointment where there is not deep love" ("A Testament of Hope," in *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, p. 299). I too love the church. I too have wept. I too hope to see and live rightly in our times. It is out of concern for all of us that I write these things.

God is working. I simply hope for more and write toward that end. And though these matters can and must be discussed in civil tones, they also merit sharp words, passionate words.

May God pour out his cleansing fire on us again and set us on the proper course. I pray it be so.

