



Contemporary Issues Discussion Guide

ED CYZEWSKI

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To My Grandparents Edward and Regalada Cyzewski

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Early Christian philosopher, theologian, and one of the most distinguished of the early fathers of the Christian church. His epistles and commentaries are recognized by many as the first attempt at a scholarly explanation of Christianity.

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Philosopher and theologian who served as bishop of the North African city of Hippo Regius for the last third of his life. A crucial figure in the development of western Christianity, Augustine framed the concepts of original sin and just war. Many Protestants, especially those in the Reformed tradition, consider him to be one of the theological fathers of Reformation teaching on salvation and grace. He is best known for his books *Confessions* and *The City of God*.

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FIRST THOUGHTS

What's your story? What follows is a thin slice of what makes me who I am.

I was raised in the northeast part of the United States on the northeast edge of Philadelphia in a middle-class family. In 2005, I moved to the southwest corner of Vermont, where I live in a small town down the road from Norman Rockwell's old house. My chances of running into a bear versus a person in my backyard are fifty-fifty.

Yes, my world is pretty rural. So rural that while cell phone companies crisscross even war-torn nations on the African continent with coverage, in my corner of the countryside, cell phones often only serve as emergency lights. In fact, that's exactly what we did with our cell phone once.¹ And we need a satellite dish just to get sluggish Internet.

I'm also a disgruntled Republican who wanders between the Democratic and Republican parties, valuing and despising parts of each. My occasional criticism of Republican policies stems more from the power that Republicans have enjoyed recently. Yet Democrats have their own catalogue of mistakes that deserve critique and scrutiny from Christians.

Your story might be a lot like mine, or it might be vastly different.

WHO WE ARE AND WHAT WE BELIEVE

I'm giving you a glimpse into my story because who we are significantly affects what we believe. That includes the views we hold when it comes to

theology. Who I am means that I can't pretend to have an objective, unbiased perspective about where I land theologically.

That's important for you to know as you begin this discussion guide, which serves as an accompaniment to the book *Coffeehouse Theology*. The goal of that book is to explore why and how it's essential that we do our job as Christians to learn from our own contexts and the contexts of others as we form theology in today's world. The goal of this guide is to help us start doing it. Theology influences how we approach the issues of our time, and in the following pages I want all of us to wrestle with the implications of theology in everyday life.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

To accomplish the goal of creating an applied theology that speaks to important issues Christians face today, I've organized each of the twelve sessions of this book as follows:

Terminology

Each session begins with a brief definition of the topic. In order to make these definitions as neutral as possible, yet also as contemporary as possible, I've adapted them from *Wikipedia*, an online encyclopedia written collaboratively by volunteers from around the world. The idea is to provide a snapshot of how current culture defines these terms. However, I urge you and your discussion group to question whether these definitions are too broad or narrow, to seek out additional sources for the meanings of these terms, and to discuss and arrive at your own definitions.

Ponder This

I've compiled the voices of historic Christians, global theologians, and a number of my friends and fellow bloggers who have been a part of my own theological growth. Although not a complete representation of the diverse Christian voices in our history and in our world, these men and women from a variety of countries and continents speak to the application of theology to some of the major issues in our world today.

Quote Interlude

I've included a few short quotes on each topic to further spark your thinking and to broaden the voices addressing each topic. Also, sometimes the pithiness of these quotes offers a humorous or a sobering take on the topic that the longer "Ponder This" excerpts miss.

My Thoughts

After examining the views of others from their context, I provide "My Thoughts," a commentary on the various contributions to each issue along with some insights from Scripture. Keep in mind that I'm writing from my own American (as in the United States of America) and New Englander perspective—rather than feigning a comprehensive knowledge of these complex issues—because all theology takes place within the limits of our own experiences in a particular context.

Your Thoughts

Each session ends with a series of discussion questions and ways to apply the teachings of Scripture and the insights of others to your own contexts. These aren't just "scan the session and fill in the blanks" questions. Rather, the goal is to push your boundaries a bit—to wrestle with the topic yourself and with your own group. That group might be just an informal gathering of friends, a small group from your church, a Sunday school class, or all the members of a house church.

Most of these "Your Thoughts" sections also include at least one question that involves research, contacting a local expert, or inviting a representative of an organization to speak to your Christian community. I challenge you to follow through on some of these. As a regular participant in the nonprofit organizations of my own community, I've discovered a treasure store of knowledge and experience on social justice and social action. One of the primary barriers to Christian social action is ignorance, and I believe the nonprofit sector can be a major player in reconnecting the church with its calling to identify with the poor. Keep in mind that the nonprofits in your area are the local experts; it would be foolish to overlook their place in our Christian mission.

ABOUT THE TOPICS

Regarding my selection of topics, I've asked theologians, Christian leaders, theology bloggers, and friends about the most important issues facing society today. I admit that my list isn't complete at all,² but hopefully it will move readers in the right direction for their own pursuit of contextual theology. The best I can offer is an honest appraisal of the world as I see it, while never assuming that my American treatment of these complex social and theological issues is the final answer. I recognize that I'm overlooking some significant issues, so I welcome additional discussion on my website <http://inamirrordimly.com>. For example, a wide range of sub-topics under the field of social justice are worthy of their own book, not to mention issues such as the AIDS crisis in Africa, the prison system, homelessness, abortion, education, the immigration woes of America, and the list could go on and on. We could also dig into weighty theological issues such as redemption, the work of the Holy Spirit, and divine foreknowledge. In choosing the topics in this guide, I'm simply addressing a few issues that I recognize as important but often overlooked in the American context. If we can at least learn how to start applying our theology to the issues presented in this guide, we'll be better prepared to address the rest of the issues we may face.

I'M NOT ALWAYS "FAIR"

I want to emphasize that while I do my best to be charitable and fair in presenting views other than my own for each of the topics in this guide, I would do readers a great disservice by feigning disinterest or an ability to be completely fair. In the interest of laying my cards on the table, I'll say this:

My theology is fairly conservative within the evangelical camp, yet it could be described most technically as post-conservative and emerging. I'm fully aware that I simply can never do justice to the broad scope of Christian voices in the world today, especially my brothers and sisters in Eastern Orthodox and Catholic churches and in mainline denominations. Once again, this book is a first step toward greater diversity of our theology as we apply it to our lives. When I believe that certain policies or beliefs run counter to the

teachings of Scripture, I don't disguise my opinion but speak it clearly. Of course when we're dealing with the printed word, writers sometimes misrepresent themselves. While I want to challenge you to think about some tough topics, I never want to be combative or to drive a wedge into the body of Christ. I apologize in advance for any offense I might cause. If you take a different view from the one I take, I urge you to work out your thoughts in the discussion section, and my blog is also available to address angles or issues that I've likely overlooked. Provided that I have time and that the discussion is constructive and civil, I'll happily post appropriate comments from anyone who feels overlooked or misrepresented, along with my response. Drop me a note on my blog (<http://inamirrordimly.com>), and I'll do my best to respond to as many comments as possible.

THE PRESENT-FUTURE

You might also notice that the “already— not yet” tension of the kingdom of God is present throughout this guide. For example, I believe that God's ultimate goal of peace— turning swords into plowshares— for human history should tell us something about how God wants us to live today. Holding such a view is no doubt tricky. Of course, we can't assume that we can somehow bring about heaven on earth. At the same time, we can't simply sit on our hands and wait for God to act.

Scripture speaks of this age as a foretaste, and I believe that the in-breaking of God into our world means we must take the goals of God seriously, even if they're not completely fulfilled in the here and now. By carefully walking the line between the two possible extremes, Christians today can join God in his kingdom work already taking place in our world.

ONWARD

Now that I've explained myself, outlined the plan of this guide, perhaps made you a bit uncomfortable, and issued a call to action, I truly hope that you enjoy the discussions that follow!

Ed Czerwski

Session 1

SOCIAL JUSTICE

TERMINOLOGY

Social justice refers to the concept of justice in every aspect of society. It's generally thought of as a situation in which individuals and groups are afforded fair treatment and an impartial share of the benefits of society. However, different proponents of social justice hold different interpretations of what constitutes fair treatment and an impartial share.¹

PONDER THIS

Lucille Sider Dayton: from Wisdom of the Daughters

Author's note: The story of William and Catherine Booth is one of the more impressive examples of Christians who committed themselves not only to preach the gospel but also to bring about the justice and righteousness of God in their society. This husband and wife team labored in Christian ministry as preachers in mid-1800s England and eventually started the Salvation Army in 1878. Lucille Sider Dayton introduces us to William and Catherine's work among the poor.

Catherine was at ease with the rich as well as the poor. William had been reluctant to tackle the intellectuals of London until her success there convinced them in 1865 to open a mission which became the Salvation Army in 1878. Catherine preached to royalty and did not hesitate to lobby with Queen Victoria for changes in oppressive laws. She fearlessly castigated the wealthy for their irresponsibility to the poor: "Mr. Moneymaker may keep

scores of employees standing wearily 16 hours per day . . . and on salaries so small that all hope of marriage or home is denied them.”

At a time in England when the poor were without allies, Catherine and William Booth joined them. They opened inexpensive clothing and food stores; they started programs for prisoners, giving them the option of prison or a Salvation Army agency; they built orphanages for the homeless children, homes for unwed mothers, food and shelter depots for transients, labor bureaus for the unemployed; and they fought to change oppressive laws. Through mass meetings and a petition with 343,000 signatures, the Salvation Army was responsible for the Criminal Law Amendment which raised the age of consent in the white slave traffic from thirteen to sixteen.²

QUOTE INTERLUDE

“Where justice is denied, where poverty is enforced, where ignorance prevails, and where any one class is made to feel that society is in an organized conspiracy to oppress, rob, and degrade them, neither persons nor property will be safe.”

FREDERICK DOUGLASS

“It would be nice if the poor were to get even half of the money that is spent in studying them.”

BILL VAUGHAN

“Love and business and family and religion and art and patriotism are nothing but shadows of words when a man’s starving.”

O. HENRY

“There are people in the world so hungry that God cannot appear to them except in the form of bread.”

MAHATMA GANDHI

PONDER THIS***Leonardo Boff: from “The Trinity as Good News for the Poor”***

We need to go beyond the understanding of Trinity as logical mystery and see it as a saving mystery. The Trinity has to do with the lives of each of us, our daily experiences, our struggles to follow our conscience, our love and joy, our bearing the sufferings of the world and the tragedies of human existence; it also has to do with the struggle against social injustice, with efforts at building a more human form of society, with the sacrifices and martyrdoms that these endeavors so often bring. If we fail to include the Trinity in our personal and social odyssey, we shall have failed to show the saving mystery, failed in evangelization. If oppressed believers come to appreciate the fact that their struggles for life and liberty are also those of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, working for the Kingdom of glory and eternal life, then they will have further motives for struggling and resisting; the meaning of their efforts will break out of the restricting framework of history and be inscribed in eternity, in the heart of the absolute Mystery itself. We are not condemned to live alone, cut off from one another; we are called to live together and to enter into the communion of the Trinity. Society is not ultimately set in its unjust and unequal relationships, but summoned to transform itself in the light of the open and egalitarian relationships that obtain in the communion of the Trinity, the goal of social and historical progress. If the Trinity is good news, then it is so particularly for the oppressed and those condemned to solitude.³

MY THOUGHTS

If you look back through the pages of history, Christians often made significant strides in righting the wrongs of society. In the past hundred years, however, many American Christians have lost their vision for social action. While a shift like this is complex and the exact causes are no doubt numerous, I see two main reasons why Christians—including myself—have lost our practical, social-justice edge.

First, many conservatives and evangelicals define Christianity as a doctrine to affirm or believe rather than a faith that we live out and

demonstrate in practical ways. In a class on intertestamental literature at Jerusalem University College, my professor chided Christians today for separating the beliefs of Christianity from the actual practice of righteousness. We toured the teachings of the Old Testament and Jewish writings from the time between Malachi and Matthew, especially the exhortations to give alms in the book of Tobit (a book all American Christians should read). These writings clearly link faith with a righteous way of living. This professor summed up his talk by calling us gnostics, a heretical group that believed secret religious knowledge is all that is necessary to be saved. After considering our simplistic “say the prayer to be saved” understanding of the gospel, we had to admit that he had a point.

Second, our theology of the end times—made popular by the *LEFT BEHIND* series—that focuses on the Rapture or escape from an earth engulfed by God’s fiery judgment, hasn’t exactly helped us remain active in social justice issues. This relatively recent theological phenomenon gained a solid footing in America⁴ after the Civil War, as some Christians shelved the myths of progress and the gradual advent of God’s kingdom. Instead, they began to view the world as hopelessly shattered and doomed for judgment. Salvation became synonymous with escaping the world. And conveniently, as Christians lost sight of their role in creation, the industrial revolution came along. Not only was the world doomed, but we could also attain temporary prosperity by exploiting the earth’s resources until the Rapture. When God comes down to scrap our broken world, he won’t have to worry about destroying any of the precious resources in the ground, only the hordes of sinners engulfed in worldwide conflict against the tribulation force. Perhaps I’m overstating my point. But as someone who used to champion this view, I think we need to wrestle with its implications even if they aren’t exactly verbalized and stated outright.

The mission of the Booths in starting the Salvation Army provides just one example of Christians uniting faith with social justice. Even in the early church, where Christians expected Jesus to return at any moment, believers distinguished themselves by addressing the needs of the poor in addition to remaining faithful amid persecution. Julian the Apostate, Roman emperor from AD 361–363, wrote of Christians who allegedly threatened Roman

imperial authority by, of all things, caring for the poor: “These impious Galileans not only feed their own poor, but ours also; welcoming them into their agapae, they attract them, as children are attracted, with cakes.”⁵ On another occasion, this same emperor wrote:

Whilst the pagan priests neglect the poor, the hated Galileans devote themselves to works of charity, and by a display of false compassion have established and given effect to their pernicious errors. See their love-feasts, and their tables spread for the indigent. Such practice is common among them, and causes a contempt for our gods.⁶

Even through Julian’s negative characterization we can see that the early church went beyond simply preaching a message of repentance. Recognizing that the poor and those who hunger and thirst for justice are blessed, the early Christians stepped in where the government remained aloof.

While the Booths worked to meet almost every need imaginable among the poor, another Christian of the time, George Müller, worked tirelessly to provide orphanages for children in Bristol, England. Some counts place the number of children under his care at more than 10,000. With a simple reliance on God and the guidance of Scripture, Müller transformed the lives of thousands of children otherwise neglected by society.

Although Christians haven’t always served as shining examples in the realm of social justice, a number of contemporary Christian leaders are working toward justice in their communities. One is Shane Claiborne⁷, author of *The Irresistible Revolution*, a member of the Simple Way community (www.thesimpleway.org), and a resident of the Potter’s House in the Kensington neighborhood of Philadelphia. Members of this faith community commit themselves to prayer, worship, and the study of Scripture, while also tutoring children, distributing food, and partnering with local nonprofit organizations.

The word *poor* comes up nearly 180 times in the NIV translation of the Bible. Throughout the books of the Law (especially Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy), God continually makes provisions for the poor of the land,

including leaving parts of the harvest in the field for the poor, returning all land to the original owners after fifty years, and giving loans without interest. Conditions deteriorate during the time of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, and the prophets rail against the corruption of the rulers who exploit the poor of the land. The writer of Proverbs states, “He who oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker, but whoever is kind to the needy honors God” (14:31), while the prophet Isaiah takes particular interest in God as a refuge for the poor (see Isaiah 14:30; 25:4). The New Testament continues these themes, with caring for the poor particularly prominent in the Luke-Acts narrative, not to mention that pesky passage in James 2 rebuking Christians for neglecting the poor and calling their faith useless without works. James says:

What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, “Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. (James 2:14-17)

When I was in seminary, my fellow students and I joked with one another at parting, “Keep warm and well fed.” In essence, we were making light that our heady theological study didn’t always translate into Christian action. As our truthful little jab indicates, it’s disturbingly easy to be a Bible-reading Christian and attend church every Sunday yet fail to help the poor. I don’t believe that Christians are selfish or negligent. Rather, most of us are either ignorant of the biblical commands or paralyzed by a lack of knowledge about what action to take.

Even as I read about God’s concern for the poor, I can’t help thinking to myself, *I believe the right things and try to avoid sin— isn’t that enough?* Of course, this thought serves as a good start. But it certainly flies in the face of our Christian heritage—a heritage that places Christians in the forefront of working to bring about God’s justice to our world.

One way we can think differently so that our salvation prods us toward

action is by reframing our narrative. Instead of God's yanking us out of a world doomed to destruction, what if we took the incarnation as our starting point? God essentially invaded our world, bringing his kingdom rule that conquered evil, but didn't completely banish it. Jesus was serious when he declared that those who hunger and thirst for justice are blessed. As prosperous Americans, perhaps the key to enjoying that blessing is to hunger and thirst for justice to be delivered to others. We join God in his mission to bring about his saving rule and justice to our broken world, so we must struggle with the implications that mission places on our wealth, possessions, employment, worship, consumption, politics, and every other facet of life. Instead of a salvage mission, we can be a part of God's redemption mission.

YOUR THOUGHTS

- Why would Christian ministers such as William and Catherine Booth dedicate so much time to meeting the physical needs of their society?
- Do you think that serving the poor changes the gospel message? How? How could it change the way you share that message?
- Do you agree that over the past hundred years many American Christians have lost their focus on social justice? Why or why not?
- Reread James 2:14-17. What actions can you and other Christians take to apply these words today? How does this list change depending on your context (for example, if you live in an urban, suburban, or rural environment)?
- Look into the history of a major worldwide Christian social justice organization such as the Salvation Army, World Vision, or Samaritan's Purse. Discuss what you learn about the role of Christians in the pursuit of social justice.

- What social issues need to be addressed in your context (poverty, homelessness, unemployment, drug use, alcoholism, poor education, medical care, heating assistance, and so on)? Use a concordance or an online search at www.biblegateway.com to look up related verses. Talk about what you learn and what actions you might take.
- Find a social justice or social action organization in your area and invite a representative to speak at your church or small group. Even if the representative isn't a believer, ask that person to address what Christians can do to help the organization fulfill its mission.