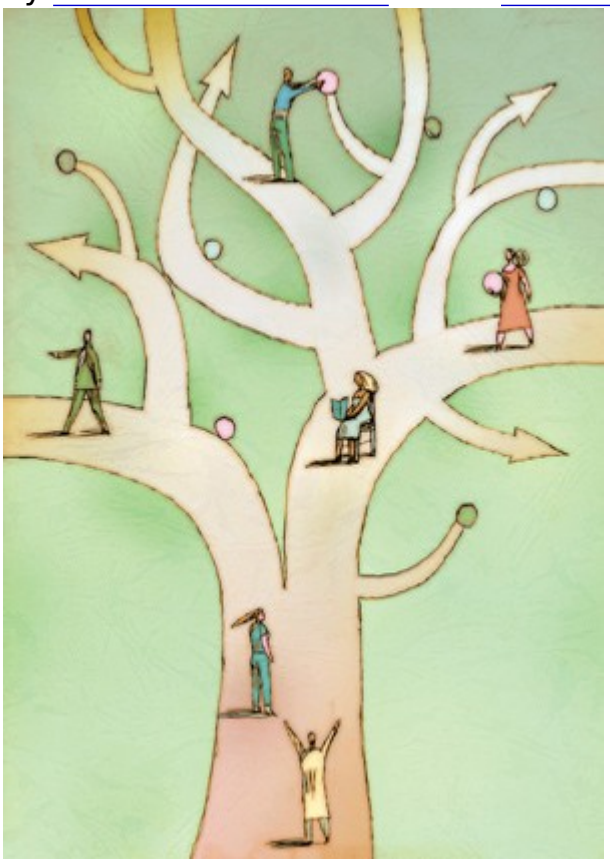
The way to justice

by Nicholas Wolterstorff in the December 1, 2009 issue



Todd Davidson

It is by living and dying that one becomes a theologian, Martin Luther said. With that comment in mind, we have resumed a Century *series published at intervals since 1939 and asked theologians to reflect on their own struggles, disappointments, questions and hopes as people of faith and to consider how their work and life have been intertwined. This article is the second in the series.*

Autobiography does not come easy to me. I grew up in a community of Dutch Reformed immigrants in a tiny farming village in southwest Minnesota. The ethos of the Dutch Reformed was never to call attention to oneself, to be modest in all things, never to brag or boast, never to toot your own horn. If you have done something well, let others say so; don't say it yourself. The Minnesota ethos was always to understate. If someone compliments you for some fine job you have done,

either say “Thanks” and let it go at that or say “Yah, not bad, I suppose.” If a fellow student asks how you did on your report card and you got all As, say “Done worse.” Of course, lying is out. So if you have never done worse, if you have always gotten all As, say “Seen worse.” Autobiography feels awkward, self-conscious, indecent, rather like exposing oneself in public. But I will do my best.

That immigrant Dutch Reformed community in which I grew up was poor. Its poverty was not grinding poverty, but almost all families were poor. And it was egalitarian; people were treated alike. Had there been any wealth to be ostentatiously displayed, the community would have firmly disapproved of such display. Much later I learned about Max Weber’s thesis that the origins of capitalism are to be found in the ethos of early Calvinism; the Calvinists, so said Weber, regarded financial success as a sign of God’s favor. The attitude of my father was the exact opposite. He automatically assumed that if someone in the community was beginning to accumulate substantial wealth, that was not to be attributed to God’s favor but to shady dealing.

Behind Weber’s interpretation of early Calvinism was his belief that “double predestination” was prominent in its ethos; financial success was regarded as the sign that one was numbered among the elect, so Weber thought. I dare say that double predestination was prominent in the Dutch Reformed ethos of the 17th century. But I myself don’t recall ever hearing it preached or taught. It was something that we young people pestered our ministers about in catechism classes. The ministers all seemed uncomfortable and defensive when the topic came up; this encouraged us to press on in pestering them. The image of God that I picked up was not the image of an arbitrary tyrant but an image of majesty and awesomeness.

If double predestination was not prominent in the version of Calvinism in which I was reared, what was? If asked as a teenager, I would probably have spouted some folklore about what differentiated us from the German Catholics and Norwegian Lutherans surrounding us there in Minnesota—and from the Presbyterians in our town whom we called “Americans.” It was not until I was a student at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan, that I came to self-understanding.

Doctrine and theological discussion have always been prominent in the Dutch Reformed tradition. But the professors who inspired me at Calvin College were not theologians. Though they were very good at discussing theology when the occasion arose, they did not spout doctrine. They had imbibed the mentality and spirituality of

Abraham Kuyper, the Dutch theologian and activist of the last three decades of the 19th century and the first two of the 20th; what they instilled in us, their students, was Kuyper's neo-Calvinism.

If I had to put into as few words as possible what that mentality and spirituality were, it would go something like this: God's call to those who are Christ's followers is to participate in the life of the church and to think, feel, speak and act as Christians within the institutions and practices that we share with our fellow human beings. We are not called to go off by ourselves somewhere to set up our own economic practices, our own political institutions, our own art world, our own world of scholarship; we are called to participate within our shared human practices and institutions.

But we are not to participate within these practices and institutions like everybody else, then adding on our Christian faith. Christian faith is not an add-on. There is no religiously and morally neutral way of participating in these practices and institutions. Everybody participates as *who they are*; and whatever else each of us may be, we are creatures who have convictions about God and the world, about life, about the good and the right. These convictions shape, in subtle and not so subtle ways, what we do when we participate in those shared practices and institutions.

To this must be added the obvious fact that there is no consensus among human beings on these matters; we disagree on matters of religion and morality, we sometimes disagree, some times profoundly, in our comprehensive perspectives. Thus it is that the Christian participates, or should participate, qua Christian, just as the naturalist participates qua naturalist and the humanist, qua humanist. The practices and institutions are shared, but the way in which we participate in them is not neutral but pluralist.

That was the vision that we as students at Calvin College in the 1950s were taught. When it came to the life of the Christian in scholarship, the vision was encapsulated in the Augustinian-Anselmian formula, "Faith seeking understanding." Not faith added to understanding, but faith seeking understanding. What Augustine and Anselm meant by the formula is that the Christian scholar is called to transmute what he already accepts on faith into something that he now knows and no longer merely believes. What our teachers meant by the formula was that the Christian scholar is called to participate in the academic discipline of, say, psychology in such a way that she sees through the eyes of faith the reality that the psychologist

studies. This does not mean that everything there looks different to her from how it looks to those who are not Christian. Enough that *some* things look different.

This is a far cry from the habit, common among Christian academics, of developing theologies of this and of that—a theology of psychology, for example, or of aesthetics. A theology of aesthetics is *about* aesthetics; it is meta-aesthetics. That's different from looking at aesthetic reality through the eyes of faith.

Note that nothing has been said about constructing proofs for God's existence, about collecting evidence for the reliability of Christian scripture, and so forth. Our teachers had no interest whatsoever in evidentialism: no interest in evidence, more evidence, yet more evidence. It's not that they explicitly opposed evidentialism; they simply showed no interest in it. They took for granted that one did not have to have proofs and carefully assembled evidence to be entitled to be Christian. I took a course in which we worked through the first 20 or so "questions" in Aquinas's *Summa theologiae*. We studied Aquinas's "five ways" in depth and at length. Never did our teacher suggest that our Christian faith did or should hang on one or another proof for God's existence turning out to be both sound and persuasive to all rational human beings.

This "Kuyperian" vision which I imbibed in college has remained mine throughout my life. I have tried in some of my writings to articulate the vision itself in far more detail than my college teachers ever did; recent developments in philosophical epistemology have been of great aid in that. And I have been pushed, nudged and jolted to work out the vision in directions that I was not at the time inclined toward. My life in scholarship has been the opposite of the classic German professor—I caricature—who at the age of 25 has a vision for a 15-volume system and hopes that his death will roughly coincide with the completion of the final volume. But the vision itself has remained steady—no reversals, no conversions, no dramatic changes of mind.

And it has stood me in good stead over the years. It helped me when I bumped up against logical positivism in my philosophy graduate studies at Harvard. A central part of the positivist position was that every attempt to say anything about God is without meaning. Since my faith was not based on proofs, I did not find myself worried that this contention of the positivists had undermined the proofs. Instead I found myself standing back with something like calm bemusement. I discerned that the deep-lying conviction which led the positivists to say what they were saying was

that modern natural science is the only road to human progress. I found this totally implausible. Thus not for a moment did I believe that the positivists had uncovered the objective truth of the matter and that I either had to give up my Christian faith or figure out how to accommodate it to the truth now once and for all delivered by the positivists. I have always found jumping on and off academic bandwagons—all too common among my fellow Christians in the academy—to be unseemly, even disgusting.

Now for some of the pushes, nudges and jolts. After finishing grad school, I taught for two years in the philosophy department at Yale. I then returned to my alma mater, Calvin College, to teach in the philosophy department (which I did for 30 years before returning to Yale). In September 1976 Calvin sent me to participate in a conference at the University of Potchefstroom in South Africa. Potchefstroom is not far from Johannesburg; the university at the time was run by the Doppers, a theologically conservative version of the Dutch Reformed tradition in South Africa. There were quite a few Dutch scholars present at the conference, a few of us from Canada and the U.S., both blacks and whites from other parts of Africa, and Afrikaners from South Africa along with blacks and so-called coloreds.

The Dutch were very angry at the Afrikaners over apartheid and very knowledgeable about it, so they exploited every opening they could find to express their anger. The Afrikaners were very angry at the Dutch for being so angry at them and exploited every opening they could find to say so. After about a day and a half of this angry back-and-forth, neither party had anything new to say. It was then that the blacks and coloreds from South Africa began to speak up, more quietly than the Dutch and the Afrikaners. They spoke movingly of the ways in which they were daily humiliated and demeaned, they described what the apartheid system was doing to their people, and they cried out for justice.

The response of the Afrikaners took me completely aback. They did not contest the claim of the blacks and coloreds that they were being treated unjustly. Instead they insisted that justice was not a relevant category. The relevant category was love, charity, benevolence. They proceeded to tell stories about the ways in which they exhibited charity toward blacks and coloreds. They gave Christmas gifts to the blacks living in their backyards, passed on used clothing to the children, etc. And they argued that it was not self-interest but benevolence that motivated the entire system of apartheid. The overall aim was to allow the 11 or so different nations (peoples) in South Africa each to find its own identity. That would be impossible if

they were all mixed through each other; they had to be separated. That was the grand goal of apartheid. The Afrikaners concluded by saying that they felt hurt that blacks and coloreds so seldom expressed gratitude for the charity extended to them. Turning to the blacks and coloreds in the conference, they pleaded, “Why can’t we just be brothers in Christ and love each other?”

Scales fell off my eyes. What I saw, as I had never seen before, was benevolence being used as an instrument of oppression. I felt called by God, in the classic Protestant sense of *call*, to speak up for these wronged and suffering people and to speak up for justice.

A year and a half later, in May 1978, I attended a conference on Palestinian rights on the West Side of Chicago. I never learned why I was invited, and I have never understood what it was in myself that led me to attend. But I did. There were about 150 Palestinians present, and they emphatically identified themselves as Palestinians, not as Arabs who just happened to live in Palestine. Most of them were Christian. They poured out their guts in flaming rhetoric—rhetoric too hot, I subsequently learned, for most Americans to handle. They too spoke of the ways in which they were daily demeaned; they spoke of how they had been dispossessed of their land in 1948 and of how that dispossession was continuing. And they too issued a call for justice. Again I felt that I had been called by God to speak up for these wronged and suffering people and to speak up for justice.

I have tried on a few occasions to put into words why it was that I was so moved by this cry for justice coming from South Africa and from the Palestinians. I had opposed the Vietnam War. But I had not been affected in the same way by it, and I had not thought much in terms of justice. Let me here forego any attempt at self-understanding and just say that being confronted by a call from God to speak up for these and other wronged people and to speak up for justice has profoundly shaped my subsequent life. I have spoken up in opposition to apartheid; I have spoken up for the Palestinians. And the topic of justice has become more prominent than any other in my writing. In 1983 I published *Until Justice and Peace Embrace*; in 2008 I published *Justice*: *Rights and Wrongs*. I am presently bringing to completion a manuscript on the relation between love and justice that I am tentatively calling *Justice in Love*.

Handed down to us from antiquity are two comprehensive imperatives. One, coming to us from both Greco-Roman antiquity and Jewish-Christian antiquity, is the

imperative to do justice; the other, coming to us only from Jewish-Christian antiquity, is the imperative to love one's neighbor as oneself. On the face of it, these two imperatives do not display how they are related. Hence it is that the topic of the relation between love and justice pervades the literature of the West. Prominent in discussions of the topic is the theme of tension. Love sometimes does injustice, or appears to do so; justice is sometimes unloving, or appears to be so.

From the time I first began speaking and writing about justice, I have encountered this theme of tension in the response of my fellow Christians. Not in all of them, of course, but in many. Almost invariably it's because they have learned to interpret the New Testament as saying that in the teaching and life of Jesus, love has supplanted justice. Justice is outmoded Old Testament stuff. When I explain how I think of justice, the resistance becomes even more pronounced. I think of justice as grounded in the honoring of rights; a society is just insofar as the rights of its members, and of the society itself, are honored. A society is just insofar as no one is wronged. I remember a dear friend standing up in the question period after a talk I had given on justice and saying, with quavering voice, "Nick, nobody has any rights; it's grace all the way down!"

In the manuscript I just mentioned, *Justice in Love*, I wrestle with this theme of tension between love and justice, and with the interpretation of the New Testament which holds that in it love supplants justice. Malformed love does indeed come into conflict with justice. But well-formed love incorporates doing justice; justice is the ground floor of well-formed love. To delete justice from the Bible is to have very little left; that holds for the New Testament as well as the Old.

And as to the claim one often hears—that the idea of rights is alien to Christianity, that the idea was invented by secular thinkers of the Enlightenment and carries possessive individualism in its DNA—I say, to the contrary, that recent scholarship makes it indisputably clear that the idea of natural rights was explicitly and prolifically employed by the canon lawyers of the 1100s and again by leaders in the early Reformed tradition. Rights are what respect for worth requires; and in the opening chapter of Genesis we learn that God created us as creatures of great worth. The idea of human worth and of rights as constituted of what respect for that worth requires are jewels bequeathed all humanity by the Hebrew and Christian scriptures.

On June 12, 1983, I received news that our 25-year-old son, Eric, had been killed the day before in a mountain climbing accident in Austria. Nothing has so changed my life as that news. My life was at once divided into before and after. After I had recovered a bit from the shock, I decided to look for some books that might help me in my grief; that's what scholars do, they read books. I found almost all of them unbearable. They were about Grief, capital "G," or about Death, capital "D," or about The Grief Process. My problem was not with Grief; my problem was that I was *in* grief. My problem was not with Death; my problem was that Eric had died. I did not have questions about The Grief Process; I was grieving, and I found standing back to think and talk about The Process obscene.

My own small book, *Lament for a Son*, which I wrote within the year after Eric's death, is not about Grief, not about Death, not about The Grief Process. It's not *about* anything. It's a *cry of* grief. I tried to be honest, not to say things that were expected of me even if I didn't believe or feel them. There's a lot of silence in the book, the silence of empty white space on the page. There are a lot of questions in it. A friend told me that there are almost as many sentences that end with question marks as with periods; I take his word for that. And a lot of it is image and metaphor, as when I said that sorrow was no longer the islands but the sea.

Eric's death changed my life. But did it change my mind? Did it change how I think? I had not thought much about grief previously. I had no occasion to do so—or better, I had not taken occasion to do so. But now, in various of my writings, I have looked at how we in the West, both Christians and non-Christians, deal with grief. What has struck me is how prominent is the strategy of *disowning* grief, either by doing one's best to get over it or by denouncing it as sinful. I could not and cannot disown my grief; that for me would amount to disowning Eric. I loved him. If he was worth loving when alive, he is worth grieving over when dead.

And as for the theodicies produced by my fellow philosophers and by theologians, what now strikes me is that almost all of them are greater-good theodicies. For the sake of the greater good, God decided to allow some human beings to die young and some to suffer long and deep. I cannot accept this. What I find scripture saying is that God wants each and every one of God's human creatures to flourish until full of years. Did Eric's death serve some greater good? I refuse to think in those terms. My problem comes with that *each and every*. Eric did not live until full of years. Something has gone awry in God's world. I don't know why that is. I live the unanswered question. My writing out of these thoughts has been piecemeal and

intermittent; I haven’t known how to do better.

I have written a good deal about art over the course of my career, not because philosophy of art was a chapter in some system that I was developing but because art intruded itself, begging for attention. And I have written a good deal about liturgy, because liturgy intruded itself, begging for attention. To explain how these intrusions went would be to sound variations on a theme that I have now already sounded twice. My thinking has been in good measure from outside in rather than from inside out, and all the while the basic framework has remained intact. So rather than spinning off additional variations of the theme, let me bring these reflections to a conclusion.

The Kuyperian vision that I sketched out earlier presupposes that at the core of the Christian life is a dialectical yes and no: a yes to God’s creation, and to all that is good in human creation; a no to all that is nonloving and unjust in what we human beings say and make and do. Christian existence requires Christian discrimination, along with the ability and willingness to say “This is good” to what is good and the courage to say “This must not be” to what is bad—the courage to say “This must not be” even when one is unable to say how it can be undone.

My reflections over the years on justice, grief and other topics have led me to the sad conclusion that the ability of present-day American Christians to make Christian discriminations and to act courageously on those discriminations have been grievously impaired. Rampant in the American church today is the gospel of prosperity; preachers tell their congregations that what Jesus wants for them is earthly happiness and financial success; if they believe in Jesus, those will come their way. So what am I to do with my grief over Eric’s death? Am I to conclude that if I believed more firmly in Jesus, I wouldn’t be bothered by his death? Or what am I to do with my father’s suspicion of wealth, conclude that either he didn’t believe in Jesus enough or was insufficiently fond of money? I can scarcely find words to express my revulsion for a Christianity of this sort. We worship one who had nowhere to lay his head and who was obedient unto death, death by judicial execution. And now you tell me that this same Jesus wants us all to seek worldly happiness and financial success? I don’t understand it.

And as to public life, what I hear many of my fellow Christians say and do is equally painful. When they get into politics, they all too often demean their opponents and tell lies with the worst of them; their only goal seems to be power for themselves

and their cohorts. When they talk about national affairs, they talk about growing the economy, not about justice to the downtrodden. Yes, health insurance for all is expensive. But in a wealthy society like ours, surely every creature created in God's image and redemptively loved by God has a right to fair access to decent health care. When they talk about international affairs, they talk about national interest, not about what justice requires. Whether torture is useful has become a matter of controversy. But the question for those of us who are Christians is not whether it is useful but whether is it compatible with a human being's God-given dignity to torture a person. Justice is upfront in scripture. In the thinking and doing of many of my fellow Christians today, it is nowhere to be found. Love and justice weep.

Other installments in this "How my mind has changed" series:

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