

# RETURN TO JUSTICE

SIX MOVEMENTS THAT REIGNITED  
OUR CONTEMPORARY  
EVANGELICAL CONSCIENCE

SOONG-CHAN RAH AND GARY VANDERPOL



**BrazosPress**

*a division of Baker Publishing Group*  
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Soong-Chan Rah and Gary VanderPol, *Return to Justice*  
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Published by Brazos Press  
a division of Baker Publishing Group  
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287  
www.brazospress.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Rah, Soong-Chan, author.

Title: Return to justice : six movements that reignited our contemporary evangelical conscience / Soong-Chan Rah and Gary VanderPol.

Description: Grand Rapids : Brazos Press, 2016. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2016006111 | ISBN 9781587433764 (pbk. : alk. paper)

Subjects: LCSH: Social justice—Religious aspects—Christianity—History. | Evangelicalism—History.

Classification: LCC BR115.J8 R3145 2016 | DDC 261.8—dc23

LC record available at <http://lcn.loc.gov/2016006111>

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Portions of the section “From Jerusalem to Babylon” in chapter 1 are taken from Soong-Chan Rah, *Prophetic Lament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2015), 35–43, 86–88; and Soong-Chan Rah, “The Sin of Racism,” in *The Image of God in an Image Driven Age: Explorations in Theological Anthropology*, edited by Beth Felker Jones and Jeffrey W. Barbeau. Copyright © 2016 by Beth Felker Jones and Jeffrey W. Barbeau. Used by permission of InterVarsity Press, P.O. Box 1400, Downers Grove, IL 60515, USA. [www.ivpress.com](http://www.ivpress.com)

An earlier version of some portions of chapter 4 appears in Soong-Chan Rah, “Salt, Light, and Social Change,” *Sojourners* (November 2011): 20–24. Reprinted with permission from *Sojourners*, (800) 714-7474, [www.soj.net](http://www.soj.net).

Portions of chapter 5 are taken from Soong-Chan Rah, “The Sin of Racism,” in *The Image of God in an Image Driven Age: Explorations in Theological Anthropology*, edited by Beth Felker Jones and Jeffrey W. Barbeau. Copyright © 2016 by Beth Felker Jones and Jeffrey W. Barbeau. Used by permission of InterVarsity Press, P.O. Box 1400, Downers Grove, IL 60515, USA. [www.ivpress.com](http://www.ivpress.com)

The section under “The Formation of the National Black Evangelical Association” in chapter 5 uses material previously published in Soong-Chan Rah, “Prophetic Voices and Evangelical Seminary Education,” *Common Ground Journal* 8, no. 1 (Fall 2010): 32–48.

A portion of chapter 6 is adapted from Gary VanderPol, “World Vision,” in *Religious Leadership: A Reference Handbook*, edited by Sharon Henderson Callahan (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2013), 494.

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16 17 18 19 20 21 22 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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*Dedicated to our mutual church community*  
at Cambridge Community Fellowship Church.

*To my son, Elijah.*

May these examples inspire you to see  
the work of God in your own life.

—SCR

*To my mother,*

who has always known just how to listen.

—GVP

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# Acknowledgments

Thanks to my writing partner and friend Gary VanderPol for making this a thoroughly enjoyable collaboration. I am grateful for our partnership and friendship in the gospel.

Some of the names featured in this book have also been dear friends and respected colleagues of mine. I am thankful for not only their friendship but also their willingness to invite me into their communities and to help shape me as a follower of Jesus. With tremendous gratitude to Jim Wallis, Mary Nelson, Barbara Williams-Skinner, John Perkins, Wayne Gordon, Noel Castellanos, Jo Anne Lyons, Rich Stearns, Jim Bere, Joan Mussa, Ron Sider, Bill Pannell, Ruth Bentley, Wes Granberg-Michaelson, Ron Potter, Carl Ellis, Russ Knight, and Peter Sjoblom.

Thanks to my friends and colleagues at North Park Theological Seminary, North Park University, and the Evangelical Covenant Church. These communities intersect my work, my vocation, my calling, and my ministry, and I am grateful for those who have been an integral part of these learning communities: Gary Walter, David Parkyn, Dave Kersten, Michael Emerson, Joe Jones, Stephen Chester, Terry Lindsay, Dan White Hodge, Mary Trujillo,

Elizabeth Pierre, Dick Lucco, Debbie Blue, Cecilia Williams, John Teter, and Jerome Nelson.

My teaching assistants during the process were of immense help. Tim Rhee reviewed much of the content for this book, while Brandon Wrencher's work on the *Christian Community Development Association Theological Journal* freed me to focus my efforts on this work. I have also been blessed with past students who have deeply shaped my present work: Valerie Landfair, Dominique Gilliard, Vince Bantu, Diana Bantu, Evelmyn Ivens, Kevin Brown, Prajakta David, and Nilowona Nowlin.

I am indebted to my academic mentors in the field of American Religious Studies. Doug Sweeney, Grant Wacker, Kate Bowler, Mark Chaves, Valerie Cooper, and A. G. Miller are top-notch scholars who have helped shaped the content of this book but also my growing love for American church history. In my theological studies, Willie Jennings, Emmanuel Katongole, J. Kameron Carter, Eldin Villafane, Humberto Alfaró, Ellen Davis, Sam Wells, Amy Laura Hall, Terry LeBlanc, Ray Aldred, Doug Hall, and Judy Hall have been essential in shaping the trajectory of my theological inquiry. In recent years, the friendship among Evangelicals for Justice has been instrumental in the formation of my ongoing passion to see God's work for justice among evangelicals: Lisa Sharon Harper, Andrea Smith, Mae Cannon, Sandra VanOpstal, Liz VerHage, Paul Metzger, Randy Woodley, and Jimmy McGee as well as the friendships forged through the Christian Community Development Association and Sojourners communities: Mark Charles, Kathy Khang, Peggy Flanagan, Adam Taylor, Ernest and Camryn Smith, Chanequa Walker-Barnes, Bethany Harris, Danny Carroll, Leroy Barber, Ken Wytsma, Michael McBride, Gabriel Salguero, and many others who have helped shape my personal passion for God's social justice.

I want to extend much gratitude toward our extended family, my father-in-law in Korea, my brother-in-law in California, my sisters and their families in Maryland, and my mom for their support and encouragement.

Every time I finish a writing project, I am reminded how much my family shapes my writing efforts. I often write with my children, Annah and Elijah, in mind. I pray that my words would encourage and inspire you to live into God’s calling for your lives. My hope for you comes from my understanding of God’s work and faithfulness. My wife Sue serves as an example of God’s faithfulness toward me. I thank God every day for a partner in life and a family that encourages and strengthens me to serve Him.

Soong-Chan Rah

As a scholar-pastor, I have tried to bring together the best of the academy and the church, which means I have embodied neither as well as I would like. But the work of integration has been one of the chief joys of my life. I hope that mentors and friends from my academic, activist, and pastoral communities will recognize their influence in this book.

First and foremost, thanks to my co-author and friend Soong-Chan Rah, who I hold as a model of genuinely prophetic ministry. It has been a privilege to work with you in yet one more arena of service.

My doctoral advisors Dana Robert and David Hempton patiently and insightfully guided me through (too many!) years of academic research for this book. Their critical but deeply respectful grasp of the global evangelical story has profoundly impacted the way I see my tradition. I am grateful for their investment in me. My time at Boston University was also shaped by a stimulating learning community whose equal I have not yet found. I want to thank Eric Baldwin, Brian Clark, Ben Hartley, Yeonseung Lee, and Glen Messer for faithfully imagining together the way in which knowledge of evangelicalism’s past might shape its future.

My colleagues at Denver Seminary—especially Daniel Carroll Rodas, Bob Cutillo, Jeff Johnson, Michelle Warren, and president Mark Young—provided a collegial, encouraging atmosphere

conducive to the integration of scholarship and activism. Thanks so much for your support.

I am grateful also for friends and mentors who have helped me dream beyond the limitations of rigid academic and ecclesial boundaries, especially Vince Bantu, Nic and Maurine Bekaert, Cameron Wu-Cardona, Warren Chiang, Marthinus Daneel, Jim and Ruth Padilla DeBorst, Roger and Claire Dewey, Josh Harper, Albert Olson Hong, Larry Kim, Mako Nagasawa, Jimmy Quach, Colin Chan Redemer, Dan Schmitz, and Melissa Yeh.

I want to recognize the sisters and brothers who have walked with me on my own personal return to justice at New Hope Covenant Church in Oakland, California; Cambridge Community Fellowship Church in Cambridge, Massachusetts; Comunidad Emaús in San José, Costa Rica; and my Spiritual Direction Men's Group (SpiDer Men). You have helped me to live what I am writing about: thank you. To my current community, Church Without Walls in Berkeley, California—I count it a privilege to create through our life together a new chapter in the story I have tried to recount in these pages.

Finally, I am grateful to my wife Jodi, who has always inspired me on my justice journey—often because I'm just trying to keep up with her! Thank you for growing with me this far. And thanks to our kids, Isaiah and Camila, who have patiently endured being dragged around the world with us as we pursue the next step God has for us. I pray that you will have an ever-greater measure of the Spirit behind the trailblazers in this book.

Gary VanderPol

# Introduction

In 1947, budding theologian Carl F. H. Henry wrote a short book titled *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism*. In it he surveys the American fundamentalist movement's engagement with the most important social issues of the day. Henry does not so much attack the fundamentalists for their social ethic as for their lack of one. Within their ranks, he finds little or no contribution to politics, economics, race and labor relations, intellectual life, or the arts. He paints a picture of fundamentalists with their backs turned to the world as they devotedly dissect the minutiae of obscure prophecy, taking pride in their total disconnect from a society destined to perdition.

Such a characterization might not seem an unusual interpretation of fundamentalism for a theologian trained at liberal institutions like Boston University and Harvard, as Henry was. But what makes *Uneasy Conscience* stand out is that Henry was himself a fundamentalist, intent on provoking his compatriots to apply the insights of conservative biblical theology to their contemporary context. Skeptical that fundamentalism's old guard could rise from its slumber, he placed his hope in a younger generation who called

themselves evangelicals—a group he hoped could reinvigorate the social consciousness of conservative American Protestantism.

Sixty years later, after the dawn of the twenty-first century, the largest privately funded global relief and development organization in the world is evangelical, and hundreds of smaller organizations funnel more than \$2 billion overseas to meet the needs of the poor. For more than a decade one of the most famous evangelical megachurch pastors in America has been attempting the complete socioeconomic restructuring of a small African nation. Evangelicals are zealously campaigning against child slavery and sex trafficking, bringing their voices to formerly complacent churches and also to the broader public through social media and traditional television and newspaper outlets. Furthermore, thousands of neighborhood renewal ministries have enlisted millions of American evangelicals in Christian community development of various kinds. In just two generations, evangelicals have “moved from almost complete silence on the subject of justice to a remarkable verbosity.”<sup>1</sup>

These two snapshots illustrate major changes in the worldview and identity of evangelicalism, one of American’s largest religious movements. This book seeks to tell the story of how these changes came about in the span of a single lifetime, from 1947 to the present. The “movie trailer” version of our narrative goes something like this: between the two World Wars, conservative Protestants in the United States were consumed by their defense of the “supernatural” elements of the faith; they energetically built independent churches, schools, radio broadcasts, and parachurch organizations as bulwarks against secular society and the “liberal” churches. In this setting, prophetic engagement with poverty, racism, or injustice was viewed suspiciously—as either a distraction from evangelism or a sellout to liberals. But in the waning years of World War II, where our book begins, a new movement of American conservative Protestants emerged. They distinguished themselves from their fundamentalist forebears by taking a less militant, more engaged stance toward cultural and intellectual

life, yet they retained a high view of Scripture and traditional doctrinal orthodoxy. Many of these “evangelicals” continued to de-emphasize most justice issues, preferring to channel their growing social concern toward opposing communism, secularization, abortion, and (more recently) gay marriage.

However, while initially less in the public eye than other contenders against these controversial issues, American evangelicals gradually increased their efforts on behalf of justice. Shocked by the gruesome realities of global poverty, they founded a number of increasingly prominent relief and development organizations as early as the 1950s. In the late 1960s and early 1970s these efforts expanded rapidly, with missions conferences, popular periodicals, intentional Christian communities, mass-market books, and even television telethons promoting concern about poverty, sometimes in radical terms. As racial issues gained prominence, a vocal minority of African-Americans and others from the Global South broke into the previously all-white club of evangelical leadership. By the turn of the twenty-first century, most evangelicals, at least rhetorically, embraced some form of commitment to justice as a nonnegotiable part of God’s mission.

We think this is an important story that has not been given enough attention. Much analysis of contemporary evangelicalism has tried to interpret its political proclivities for a broader audience in an effort to understand the new conservative force in American politics. Thus, the contentious concerns of the religious right often dominate the narrative, overwhelming the justice issues that increasingly unite evangelicals far more than politics. We hope that this retelling brings needed balance to the public perception of twentieth-century evangelicalism. Because of space limitations, we in no way offer this book as a comprehensive analysis of the evangelical rediscovery of biblical justice. Our goal is simply to introduce the reader to a small but vital selection of key figures and seminal organizations that propelled the movement forward. It is our hope that many readers will go

on to study more deeply the activists, theologians, pastors, and organizers in this book, perhaps after meeting them here for the first time. Nevertheless, we believe that those from any faith tradition (or none at all) who seek a critical, nuanced introduction to post–World War II evangelical activism will find just that in the pages that follow.

The heart of our motivation for writing this book lies in the future, not the past. We write as actors in an unfolding script. In our roles as pastors, professors, and activists, we have learned much from the previous two generations of evangelical leaders. In fact, it would not be too much to say that our lives have been shaped by them. Our desire is not only that those who read this book will encounter solid historical analysis but also that the people and events of the past will help to form the next generation. We have observed that many times zealous believers with the best intentions rush in to fight the world’s worst injustices; unfortunately, they often wind up harming as much as helping. What is often lacking is simply the patience (and sometimes the humility) to listen first. In essence, this book is an opportunity to hear the voices of those who have gone before us so that we can adopt their strengths and avoid their struggles.

So, for readers who share our hunger and thirst for God’s justice, we offer three ways in which these stories can have an explosive impact on your own practice of justice ministry.

***Inspiration.*** While this study was generated by years of primary-source research on our topic, we unabashedly believe that the story the research tells is inspiring. For those who share the evangelical faith of the characters in the following chapters, these are not just names and dates to be dutifully chronicled; they are mentors whose lives call us to deeper commitment. Even those who are deceased are part of the “cloud of witnesses” (Heb. 12:1) that forms the broader horizon of our Christian community. Those of us who long to be mentored by godly, experienced saints can find some of what we’re looking for right here.

Today, when “justice” is marketed on church websites, when organizations that fight sex trafficking have millions of Facebook “likes,” and when thousands of teens with matching T-shirts condense “missions” into an annual week of spiritual tourism, it is highly valuable to encounter the men and women who reignited the justice aspects of God’s mission at a time when justice was not only unpopular but suspect. Because talking about race or poverty or the environment in the 1950s, ’60s, and ’70s was often seen as political—and thus inappropriate for the pulpit—those who pushed forward were usually strong on the virtue of courage; they frequently did justice despite the active resistance of their fellow churchgoers. There was no bandwagon to jump on; they built the bandwagon.

*Critique.* Nevertheless, we are not offering a collection of carefully polished stained-glass saints. Critical history allows access to people and movements as they were embedded in their socio-economic and political contexts. With hindsight, we are more likely to see the blind spots of which they were unaware and thus hopefully avoid them ourselves. Evangelicals have come a long way in their pursuit of justice, but we also have a long way to go. Careful attention to a study such as this one will help identify areas of inadequacy, paternalism, ignorance, and good intentions gone astray.

For example, one theme that recurs throughout the narrative is the evangelical penchant for choosing justice issues that do not implicate their own lifestyles or pocketbooks. It is much harder to advocate for a cause that calls for personal repentance than one that only requires fighting a common enemy. This book is a call not only to admiringly emulate leaders of the past but also to critically reform the work that they have courageously begun.

*Perspective.* Understanding the origins of this movement is essential, particularly if we want to shape where it is going. This dynamic is especially important for evangelicals, who frequently have little sense of being part of a tradition that forms them. Many

commentators point out that because evangelicalism desires to go directly “back to the Bible” for its theology and practice, it underestimates tradition’s power to unconsciously shape attitudes, behaviors, and values.

Perhaps an analogy would be helpful here: consider how our families of origin have powerfully influenced our fundamental orientations toward marriage, conflict resolution, financial management, and commitment to personal relationships. Yet it is not until we go to counseling or otherwise reflect critically on the roots of such deeply rooted patterns that we become aware of how much our own family history impacts us today. In the same way, reading a book like this can be a kind of “therapy,” enabling those who identify as evangelicals to understand how the very distinctive culture handed down by previous generations predisposes us to certain patterns of thought and practice. By becoming conscious of how tradition has shaped us, it is possible to discover the freedom to embrace evangelicalism’s positive aspects and turn away from that which has become counterproductive. Only through careful attention to the past can we determine the best way forward.

The value of historical perspective is even greater because the cultural patterns handed down by the evangelical tradition are not monolithic but essentially contested. Even within the focused area of justice activism, each generation evolved in many different directions, both among peers and in respect to its elders. As we show in the pages ahead, evangelicals have argued for many different visions of justice: compassion for individuals, transformational development, racial reconciliation, and penitent protest against oppression. Sometimes these approaches have been seen as synergistic; at other times, one approach was seen as trumping the rest. And in order to legitimize their efforts, some activists fought just as energetically against other evangelicals as they did against injustice itself. Thus, untangling the different strands gives us the power to cling to those we find most compelling. Awareness of competing approaches allows us to find our place within the tradition.

This text offers six historical snapshots of how evangelicals have engaged in the ministry of biblical justice. In part 1, we examine the power of story and how a personal connection to a story results in domestic efforts at community development and ministries of compassion to combat global poverty. In part 2, we reveal efforts to exhibit biblical justice in the public realm by addressing social injustices. Advocacy for those on the margins moved evangelicals to engage in a ministry of social and political transformation. Part 3 discusses the challenge for evangelicals to engage in the broader range of experiences and stories now found in the reality of increasing diversity. With each section, we offer pastoral insights that arise from the historical narrative.

## Who Are Evangelicals?

So far we have been referring to “evangelicals” and “evangelicalism” as if the referents for those words are obvious. However, defining these terms is notoriously controversial, and academics have spilled much ink in their attempts to clarify. For the purposes of this introduction, we will not delve too deeply into scholarly minutiae that may interest only church historians. However, before we move on to our stories, it is important to establish some degree of clarity concerning what “evangelical” means and who “evangelicals” are, as many of our readers are themselves in the process of shaping the future of the evangelical tradition.

Unlike the Roman Catholic Church or the Boston Red Sox, evangelicalism has never been a clearly bounded organization with membership, leadership, and bureaucratic structure. Instead, it is more like a movement or a spirituality that has ebbed and flowed through many different Protestant churches and denominations since the Reformation. Respected historian Mark Noll says it well: “Evangelicalism has always been made up of shifting movements, temporary alliances, and the lengthened shadows of individuals.”<sup>2</sup>

Despite the movement's amorphous nature, general agreement can be found concerning the defining characteristics of evangelicalism. Historian David Bebbington persuasively proposes that evangelicals place a strong emphasis on (1) conversionism—the spiritual transformation of the heart through personal encounter with Jesus; (2) cruciocentrism—the belief that Christ's atoning work on the cross is central for conversion; (3) activism—energetic participation in God's redeeming mission to the world; and (4) biblicism—the Bible alone is the source of spiritual truth.<sup>3</sup> Of course Christians of many kinds share these values, and evangelicals themselves have vigorously disagreed about the precise meaning of Bebbington's four tenets. But historically speaking, the fusion of these elements has produced a vital movement and, over time, a self-conscious tradition.

The evangelical family tree includes such European highlights as sixteenth-century Lutherans and Calvinists stressing *sola scriptura* (the Bible alone), seventeenth-century Pietists and Puritans emphasizing the religion of the heart, and eighteenth-century Moravians and Methodists driven to spread scriptural holiness to the ends of the earth. As the evangelical movement spilled over into America in the 1800s, Jacksonian democratic ideals, frontier entrepreneurial spirit, and massive tent meetings combined not only to produce scores of new "Bible-only" denominations but also to supersize European transplants like the Baptists and Methodists.

By the second decade of the nineteenth century, evangelicals had won over a majority of Americans from all social classes. Throughout the nineteenth century, American evangelicals energetically evangelized their new nation in the hope that revival would aid in the coming of God's righteous kingdom on earth. For evangelicals at this time, their God-given mission demanded a potent blend of preaching and prophetic social action. Despite our familiar stereotypes of socially conservative Christianity, nineteenth-century evangelicals were frequently on the cutting edge of causes like abolition, women's rights, poverty relief, urban reform,

and advocacy for immigrants. Leaders like Charles Finney, the most famous evangelist of the antebellum era, routinely invited his hearers to *both* believe in Jesus *and* join the abolitionist cause as he toured the country preaching revival. Evangelicals founded scores of organizations (sometimes collectively called the “benevolent empire”) that sought not only to provide charity for the poor but also to fundamentally reform the social structures that produced poverty in the first place. This is an extremely important point for readers of this book because it illustrates that the recent interest in justice among evangelicals is not a novelty but a rediscovery of something deep in our evangelical heritage.

In the final third of the nineteenth century, however, this holistic tradition of social engagement began to slowly erode. Shaken by the trauma of the Civil War, evangelicals began to lose their fervor for political activism (except for the prohibition of alcohol). By the turn of the twentieth century, American Protestantism was being ripped into two contending factions. On one side were the liberals, who embraced the new science of Darwinism and questioned the literal veracity of biblical miracles. Many liberals who identified with the Social Gospel movement energetically carried out justice activism as the centerpiece of their mission but de-emphasized evangelistic proclamation. In reaction, evangelicals vehemently rejected evolution and preached even stricter views of biblical inerrancy. Most tellingly for readers of this book, evangelicals also decisively distanced themselves from most forms of social action. The intense focus of those who emphasized the social gospel by challenging unjust social structures was deeply threatening to turn-of-the-century evangelicals, who came to believe that missions should be limited to personal evangelism and charity for deserving individuals. In other words, evangelicals redoubled their commitment to the gospel but “articulated only one major goal of mission: the salvation of individual souls.”<sup>4</sup> Therefore, “as the attacks on liberalism heated up, the position that one could have both revivalism and social action became increasingly cumbersome to defend.”<sup>5</sup>

After 1910 evangelicals adopted the term “fundamentalists” in order to better distinguish themselves from liberals. Fundamentalists fought for control of their denominations but lost battle after battle. Their most humiliating defeat came during the 1925 Scopes Trial, as the media subjected fundamentalist beliefs to national ridicule. By that time fundamentalists had so distanced themselves from all social concern that they had “forgotten the degree to which their predecessors—and even they themselves—had earlier espoused rather progressive social concerns.”<sup>6</sup> Scholars call this rejection of social concern the Great Reversal because of its striking contrast with nineteenth-century activism. The central theme of the stories presented in this book is the way post–World War II evangelicals challenged the legacy of the Great Reversal they inherited from their fundamentalist forebears.

Besides the Great Reversal, fundamentalists set the table for twentieth-century evangelical activists by creating a dense network of parachurch agencies, such as seminaries, Bible schools, radio programs, missions agencies, and periodicals. Because they had lost control of their denominational institutions, fundamentalists busied themselves with setting up alternative structures in which conservatives could remain faithful to “the faith that was once for all entrusted to God’s holy people” (Jude 1:3). When the next generation of evangelicals recovered the biblical concern for justice that fundamentalism had left behind, they ironically followed the same pattern of creating special purpose groups to do so. Thus, it is no surprise that all of the stories we have chosen for this book are not of denominations or church congregations but of parachurch agencies founded explicitly to reverse the Great Reversal.

## Evangelicals with a Capital *E*

By the time of the Second World War, a new generation of conservative Protestants was emerging. One segment of younger

leaders had begun to worry that the quarrelsome, belligerent tone of fundamentalist rhetoric actually impeded unity among conservatives and dampened the possibility of revival within the nation. Thus, in 1943 the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) was born. The word “evangelical” was deliberately chosen to represent conservative Protestantism, better suited than “fundamentalism,” which carried considerable contentious baggage. Instigated by J. Elwin Wright, a leader of an eclectic collection of revivalists called the New England Fellowship, and Harold Ockenga, the influential pastor at Boston’s Park Street Church, the NAE attempted to unite conservative Protestants for the sake of promoting national revival. Members of the NAE called themselves “Evangelicals” in order to signify a new phase in American conservative Protestantism and to hearken back to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Anglo-American Protestants who called themselves “evangelical.” (From this point forward, the NAE-spawned movement described above will be indicated with an uppercase *E* [*Evangelical*], whereas lowercase *e* [*evangelical*] denotes the broader historical movement that has persisted since the Reformation to this day.)

Besides the NAE, Evangelicals went on to create a related cluster of institutions, including (but not limited to) the periodical *Christianity Today*, Fuller Theological Seminary, the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, Youth for Christ, and Campus Crusade for Christ. The movement’s leaders preached in each other’s churches, served on each other’s advisory boards, wrote articles for each other’s periodicals, and attended the same conferences. Although they held no formal authority, the best-known leaders (a group sometimes lightheartedly referred to as “Billy Graham and his friends”) energetically attempted to define a movement that encompassed all true Bible-believing Americans. For their followers (who were occasionally described as “card-carrying” Evangelicals), loyalty to the Evangelical movement was often more important than denominational affiliation.

Yet the NAE suffered the fate of many organizational attempts at unity within the fissiparous history of evangelicalism: it merely added another faction to the dizzying array of conservative Protestantism. It is true that the NAE united conservatives across regional frontiers and forged “a tighter national network among previously isolated centers of evangelical activity scattered around the country. . . . It re-established a link between north and south, largely absent since the Civil War.”<sup>7</sup> But the NAE also provoked a harsh reaction from fundamentalists who interpreted its irenic tone as being soft on liberalism; its founding reignited the debate between fundamentalists who demanded strict separation from all liberal denominations and those who were content to coexist while working for a return to orthodoxy. Indeed, the counterattack from separatists kept even such conservative cornerstones as Wheaton College and the Southern Baptist Convention from joining the NAE during its early years. Therefore, “the NAE was treated more as an ordinary parachurch group rather than a normative call to Christian unity.”<sup>8</sup>

Even more important for the purposes of this book, many believers who were “evangelical” in the theological sense were excluded from or did not join NAE-affiliated groups. Offshoots of Methodism such as Holiness churches and many Pentecostal groups were especially uncomfortable with the Reformed tone set by the best-known Evangelical leaders. African-Americans, whose churches have been one of the driving forces of evangelicalism since the early nineteenth century, were shut out by the white, male leaders of Evangelicalism’s founding generation. It is one of the great ironies of Evangelicalism (and one of the central themes of this book) that the return to biblical justice was led in large part by ethnic minorities and peace churches such as the Mennonites, who were on the margins of the space created by mainstream, Calvinist-leaning, white-dominated Evangelical leadership.

Evangelicalism’s break with fundamentalism also must not be overplayed. Despite its self-conscious desire to differentiate itself

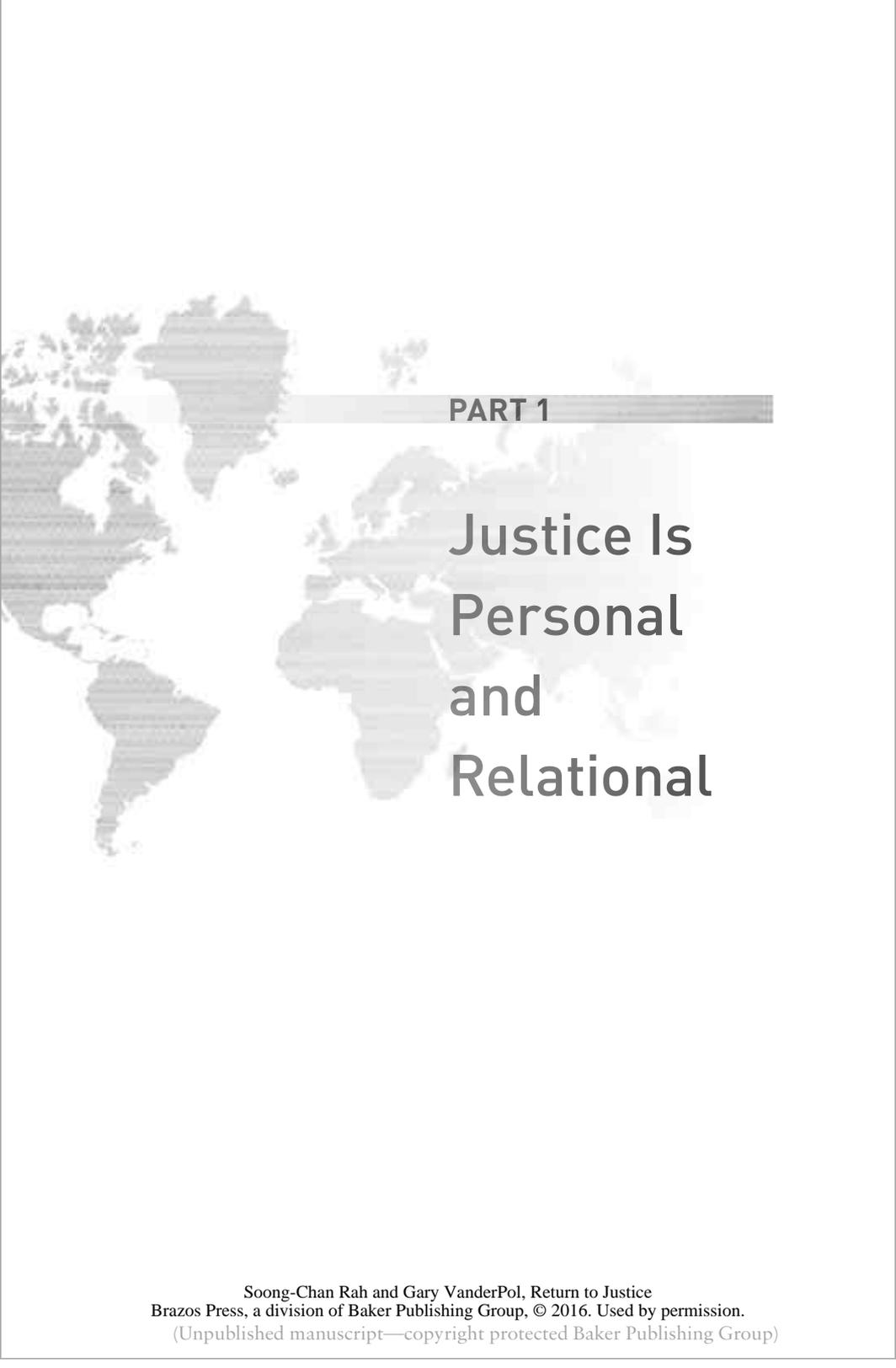
from the excesses of fundamentalism, the nascent post–World War II Evangelical movement could be seen as a wing of fundamentalism until at least the late 1950s, when Evangelical leaders began to distinguish themselves much more sharply and polemically. Nevertheless, as historian Joel Carpenter summarizes, the NAE “unleashed an idea, a new collective identity, and a dynamic force for religious initiatives. ‘Evangelicalism’ had been born.”<sup>9</sup>

Perhaps the most telling feature of the slow divorce between Evangelicals and fundamentalists was the Evangelical rejection of the fundamentalist disengagement from the surrounding culture—that is, their reversing of the Great Reversal. Henry’s *Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism*, cited in the opening paragraph of this introduction, is certainly the best-known call to return to social engagement and deserves its symbolic place as the starting point for the reopening of the door for Evangelical concern for justice. Nevertheless, *Uneasy Conscience* is somewhat vague on specifics. Even when Henry spoke in concrete terms, he was mainly concerned with secularism, whether it was taking root through “godless” universities and mainstream media in the United States or “godless” communism abroad. Many other early Evangelical leaders were motivated to reengage with society by the same fears of creeping secularization.

In fact, most historians have portrayed Evangelicalism’s early social engagement as focused on issues that would not now be termed “social justice.” For example, intellectual respectability was the consuming preoccupation for many key leaders. They felt that unless Evangelicals produced quality scholarship that was recognized by “the world” as excellent, they would never win a hearing among the influential sectors of society. Thus, the driving force behind evangelicalism’s newfound social engagement was a small band of highly-educated scholars and sympathetic pastors whose founding of Fuller Seminary in 1947 was “a truly epochal event, the beginning of a new age for Evangelicalism.”<sup>10</sup> This longing for intellectual respectability was so evident that it

was lampooned by some fundamentalists, one of whom defined Evangelical leaders as “people who say to liberals, ‘I’ll call you a Christian if you’ll call me a scholar.’”<sup>11</sup>

Cultivation of intellectual life was clearly an important expression of the reemergence of Evangelical social concern. However, it needs to be supplemented by influences from the burgeoning justice initiatives chronicled in the pages that follow. The stories in the pages that follow show that nascent Evangelical social concern had an additional source found not in the apologetics of Fuller professors but in direct encounters with injustice, oppression, and raw human suffering in the Global South and the inner cities of the United States.



**PART 1**

# Justice Is Personal and Relational

# 1

## The Power of Personal Story

*John Perkins and the Christian  
Community Development Association*

The first summer after planting our church in an inner-city neighborhood in Cambridge, Massachusetts, we conducted a Vacation Bible School for the children of the community. Cambridge Community Fellowship Church (CCFC) was composed mostly of college students and young singles in their twenties who had been attracted to the church, in part, because of its urban ministry and social action vision. These young men and women were energized by the chance to work with urban children and youth, many of whom came from low-income housing near the church. That summer as I (Soong-Chan) observed Ivy League students and alumni demonstrate the gospel with the beginnings of a social engagement in the urban context, I realized that for many of

our church members, this type of Christian involvement proved foreign to their church background.

In subsequent years, CCFC would continue evangelistic outreach to the children and youth of the low-income community in Cambridge as well as serve indigent senior citizens in a convalescence home near the church. The church partnered with a Latino church to offer tutoring and computer courses in a predominantly Latino neighborhood in Boston and also with African-American churches and the Boston TenPoint Coalition to address the issue of gang-related youth violence.

One of the ministries of the Boston TenPoint Coalition intervened in the national gangs' attempt to infiltrate Boston schools. Teamed with local police and armed with my clerical collar, I rode in the back of a police car to visit youth who had appeared on the school police blotter. We engaged the youth in the classic bad cop, good pastor routine. The police officer threatened the full force of the law, including the possibility of federal prosecution for gang activity. My role as the good pastor was to assure the youth that the community loved him and that the church would be there for him. Our shared goal was to keep the young man from joining the national gangs that were attempting to infiltrate our city. Law and grace worked together for justice.

When I look back on my experiences in urban ministry, I realize that neither my theologically conservative immigrant church upbringing nor my Evangelical seminary education had prepared me for this kind of civic engagement. I had no theological lens to understand this act of pastoral care. The seemingly singular focus on personal evangelism among many Evangelicals prevented me from seeing how riding around in a police car could actually be an integral part of the work of the church. Like many late-twentieth-century Evangelicals, I had embraced a dysfunctional and inadequate theology that revealed the impact of a twentieth-century American church history that divorced evangelism from works of social justice.

In contrast, CCFC attempted to embody the principles of the Christian Community Development Association (CCDA), a national ministry founded by and rooted in the teachings of John Perkins. As the founding pastor of CCFC, I had been influenced by the teachings of John Perkins through his books and through attendance at CCDA national conferences. John Perkins provides an Evangelical role model of a Christian leader passionately committed to personal evangelism with a deep concern for the lost. At the same time, Perkins has ministered to the poor and to the disenfranchised and has spoken about the radical biblical values of relocation, reconciliation, and redistribution. John Perkins revolutionized the way Evangelicals consider the role of the church in the context of a broken world. My own spiritual and ministry journey was shaped by the transformative power of his challenging words, which were amplified by the power of his story. John Perkins has lived a life that integrates personal evangelism and social concern in a way that challenged the status quo of late-twentieth-century Evangelicalism.

### From Jerusalem to Babylon<sup>1</sup>

As discussed above, twentieth-century Evangelicalism witnessed a conspicuous and unfortunate divorce between acts of social justice and efforts of personal evangelism. This Great Reversal was a contrast to the integration of the two streams throughout the nineteenth century. In the twentieth century, American Evangelicals demonstrated suspicion about the world. Since the world was destined for destruction, only worthy individuals in the world, not the world itself, needed saving. An optimistic view of society would be replaced by a negative approach to the world. This approach to ministry is most evident in American Evangelical engagement with the urban context.

American Christians have held a complicated relationship with the city. Often, the view of the city reflects their view of society

as a whole: an optimistic view of the larger society translates into optimism about the city. The first wave of European colonialists carried an optimistic view of the New World and its cities. The blank slate of the Americas allowed for the self-perception that an exceptional people would build an exceptional society.<sup>2</sup> The *tabula rasa* of the New World would be filled with the best of the Western world.<sup>3</sup> Colonial American Christians anticipated that the cities of the New World would become cities set on a hill, New Jerusalems and Zions.<sup>4</sup>

This optimistic view of the American city would shift over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Industrialization, urbanization, and migration impacted the city in ways that the founders of these cities could not predict. The time period following the end of the Civil War and well into the latter half of the twentieth century witnessed drastic changes in the demographics of US cities. African-Americans participated in the Great Migration, relocating from former slave states in the South to cities in the North and on the East Coast. The cities also witnessed the influx of non-Protestant and non-Western European immigrants, resulting in notable growth.

However, the influx of these “unwanted elements” in the cities meant that white Protestants now perceived cities as dangerous places. As Robert Orsi states, “City neighborhoods appeared as caves of rum and Romanism, mysterious and forbidding, a threat to democracy, Protestantism, and virtue alike.”<sup>5</sup> Cities were no longer perceived as cities set on a hill or as New Jerusalems, but instead as Babylons, the center of sin and evil. Randall Balmer notes that “Evangelicals suddenly felt their hegemonic hold over American society slipping away. . . . The teeming, squalid ghettos, . . . festering with labor unrest, no longer resembled the precincts of Zion that postmillennial evangelicals had envisioned earlier in the century.”<sup>6</sup>

Meanwhile, suburban communities offered an attractive alternative for former residents of the city.<sup>7</sup> White Americans (including

white American Christians) would embrace the narrative that the city was a broken place while the newly formed suburbs were the new places of hope and possibility. The hope for a city set on a hill was replaced with a suburb set on a hill. The culmination of this shifting perspective came to be known as “white flight.” As a result, the twentieth century witnessed the departure of whites and white churches from the city in significant numbers.<sup>8</sup> The suburbs became the new outposts for white Christians fearful of the changes in the city.

The perspective of the city as a sinful place is found in the numerous books on the city that emerged during the height of white flight. No longer were US cities considered to be cities “built on a hill” (Matt. 5:14). Instead they were portrayed as *The Secular City* or *The Unheavenly City*. These *Sick Cities* were *Babylon by Choice*, which had gone *From New Creation to Urban Crisis*, and where now *Home Is a Dirty Street*. This state of affairs compelled Christians to question *The Meaning of the City* and to ask, *Is There Hope for the City?*<sup>9</sup> With the narrative of decline dominating the Christian imagination of the city, participants in white flight could easily justify their actions. White Christians could flee the city as a spiritual act, citing the desire to be a stranger to the evil of the world, to separate themselves from the evil workings of Babylon, and to flee to the comfort and safety of suburban life. The suburbs would be the new destination for those seeking to build a New Jerusalem in America. The pivot toward the suburbs resulted in the rise of quick and easy answers to successful church ministry. With the challenges of the city behind them, these suburban churches would look for effective ways to build up the church. Church growth books and church resources became readily available.

In the latter half of the twentieth century, churches in the suburbs carried out these principles of success and growth. New, state-of-the-art church buildings would attract new members to suburban congregations.<sup>10</sup> Suburban church attendance swelled,

but this did not lead to more conversions.<sup>11</sup> Instead, suburban church growth was merely indicative of the population shift of the white community.

Harvie Conn summarizes studies conducted by Dennison Nash and Peter Berger: “The impressive increases in church membership statistics in suburbia were only a reflection of the increased number of families with school-aged children in the country, the postwar ‘baby boom’ that had helped to produce the suburban migration itself.”<sup>12</sup> The much-trumpeted growth of suburban churches had little to do with new and innovative evangelism and church growth techniques and more to do with the timing of a population shift in American society.

As the population of white Christians shifted to the suburbs, numerous seminaries and denominations taught and advocated for church growth ministry practices that supported the suburbanization of Evangelicalism. Church growth methodology enticed pastors of fledgling churches as formulas for successful ministry, and the homogeneous unit principle (HUP) operated as one of the key magic formulas employed to grow suburban churches. The HUP asserted that churches would grow faster if they focused on reaching their kind of people. By removing the barriers of racial, cultural, and socioeconomic diversity, churches would experience their desired levels of growth in the suburban enclaves. The HUP gave ecclesial justification for de facto segregation, which was already exacerbated by white flight.

Whether intentional or not, the HUP applied by suburban churches affirmed the wisdom of white flight, allowing the suburban churches to capture the migration of whites to the suburbs and leading to numerical growth. In turn, the growth of the suburban church gave (false) credence to, and perpetuated, the Church Growth movement principles, which offered methods of growth that were supposedly applicable to all churches everywhere.

The narrative of the city as fallen Babylon and the suburbs as the New Jerusalem continues to this day. Suburban churches in

the latter half of the twentieth century believed that they were the locus of American Evangelical life. This belief in themselves as the New Jerusalem was clearly demonstrated by the numerical growth of Evangelical churches and the building of new, beautiful, and impressive church buildings.

In recent years, as suburban white Evangelicals have returned to the city to contribute to urban gentrification, the city is still perceived as Babylon, in need of help from those who had built New Jerusalems in the suburbs. Urban ministry books again reflect this narrative with titles such as *The Urban Mission*, *The Urban Challenge*, *Redeeming the City*, *City Reaching*, and *The Urban Face of Mission*.<sup>13</sup> Cities that were once envisioned as beacons set on a hill, sending out missionaries to the world, were now Babylons in desperate need of missionaries—who would most likely come from the Jerusalem outposts of the American suburbs. The cities needed *The Church That Takes on Trouble* and suburban transplants as *They Dare to Love the Ghetto*, serving as *Apostles to the City*, each as *The Change Agent* who will be *Taking Our Cities for God*.<sup>14</sup>

These transplanted suburbanites envisioned themselves as bringing the heavenly city of Jerusalem from the suburbs to the city. While one could argue that this return to the city reflects a better narrative than the cultural disengagement that led to white flight, it isn't much better. Both narratives reveal a deeply rooted assumption of the supremacy of an Evangelical theology rooted in Western cultural forms of church. Both narratives assume desperate cities are mission fields. While the white flight narrative allowed Evangelicals to flee the city, which in its decline had become the New Babylon, the narrative of the Jerusalem suburbs encouraged Evangelicals to return as saviors of the city.

Both narratives assume the inferiority of the city and those who have remained there. The poor and the marginalized are objects of scorn and pity. One must either flee from this reality or seek ways to be a missionary within it. Both narratives elevate white

Evangelicals in the suburbs; they have made the right choices and are the exemplary Christians. Fleeing the city was a spiritual act of purity, and returning to the city was a spiritual act of Evangelical activism.

### John Perkins's Story

John Perkins offers an alternative narrative both to the story of withdrawal from the places of suffering and to the narrative of the white savior sent to the city to save the poor blacks. Through his personal story, Perkins reveals the folly of twentieth-century Evangelicalism, which had forsaken the poor and the marginalized in order to build Christian empires among the privileged. Perkins also represents a different narrative of the poor black man who, with limited education, could impact and transform the broader Evangelical narrative. His ability to speak a prophetic challenge to mainstream Evangelical Christianity arises from his own evangelical conversion story, a story of spiritual triumph that called apathetic Evangelicals to an activist faith.

Perkins's story is familiar to many. A quick survey of those who have met John Perkins reveals how a one-time meeting, hearing John's story and his real presence and engagement, irrevocably changed them. An important aspect of John Perkins's impact is his ability to communicate a powerful story of evangelical conviction. Ron Sider notes that "John is a great storyteller. Anyone who has listened to him speak knows how he weaves his own personal story into a call to empower the marginalized and overcome racism. That his own story is so powerful and compelling certainly helps. But he tells it in a way that wins hearts and minds—even donors to a great ministry."<sup>15</sup>

One of John Perkins's key theological contributions is the power of his story lived out in the face of great trials and tribulations. While other Evangelical leaders may possess a great testimony,

few rival the embodied story of Jesus's redemptive power in John Perkins. Among twentieth-century Evangelical leaders, few have done more with less and few have overcome as many obstacles. His story takes the classic American success story and infuses it with an Evangelical spirituality that affirms the power of the gospel while simultaneously challenging existing paradigms of active Christian faith.

John Perkins was born to a family of sharecroppers, bootleggers, and gamblers. Historian A. G. Miller notes that "much of Mississippi black culture in which John Perkins grew up was a world in which blacks were redefining their worldview against the prevailing white and Christian values. The blues reflected the black counterculture within which Perkins identified himself (gamblers, bootleggers, and lawbreakers)—those folk who were not afraid of southern white people and struggled to control their own destiny."<sup>16</sup> Miller recognizes that despite the reality of poverty and marginalization, Perkins's cultural context reveals a high degree of yearning for self-determination, even if that desire surfaced in ways that skirted the law. While understanding the dominant southern white culture in which he lived, Perkins engaged that culture with a deep-seated desire to assert human agency.

The murder of his brother by the local police was another assault on Perkins's understanding of power and powerlessness. Watching his older brother shot down as he stood up to the police revealed a cultural reality that attempted to instill fear and deprive African-Americans of self-determination. Perkins experienced the conflict felt by many blacks in the Deep South—the constant barrage against self-determination and identity. That sense of agency (established in his early upbringing) led Perkins toward an interaction with the dominant culture that defied typical categorization.

In order to embrace Christian faith, however, Perkins needed to leave not only the cultural trappings of the South but also the unhealthy expression of Christian identity that was conflated with

white supremacy. A. G. Miller notes, “Perkins’s openness to the exploration of faith came in stages after he left the South, joined the army, and eventually settled in the Los Angeles area after his discharge from the military. Perkins’s conversion to Christianity was not an immediate process. He had to leave the South and its extreme environment, racial hatred, prejudice, and oppression in order to find enough mental and physical space to explore more social and spiritual matters.”<sup>17</sup> Perkins needed distance from the strictures of the South and southern Christianity to experience a conversion that affirmed his human agency and worth.<sup>18</sup>

Perkins’s description of his own conversion demonstrates a deeply evangelical experience and the roots of an Evangelical identity. John Perkins began to attend church after he saw “something beautiful develop” in his son, who was attending the Bethlehem Church of Christ Holiness.<sup>19</sup> Perkins’s conversion occurred as a result of an encounter with Scripture. He became fascinated with the writings of Paul. As Perkins says, “I began to enjoy the Bible because of what I was learning about the Apostle Paul, how he endured so much for religion. . . . When I learned that the Apostle Paul was the writer of most of the New Testament books of the Bible, I began to study the Bible myself for the first time.”<sup>20</sup> Even before his conversion, he had become a biblicist.

Perkins’s conversion also required a Christocentric experience. As he writes in his first book, *Let Justice Roll Down*:

For the first time I understood that my sin was not necessarily and altogether against myself and against my neighbor. My sin was against a holy God who loved me, who had already paid for my sins. I was sinning in the face of His love. I didn’t want to sin anymore. I wanted to give my life to Christ, so He could take care of my sin. I sensed the beginning of a whole new life, a new structure of life, a life that could fill that emptiness I had even on payday. God for a black man? Yes, God for a black man! This black man! Me! That morning I said yes to Jesus Christ.<sup>21</sup>