

Timothy Keller, in *Generous Justice*, offers a passionate plea for, and biblical defense of, social justice. In an emotionally-charged climate of political attack, this book points to the gospel of grace as the only right motivation for taking up the cause of widows, orphans, immigrants, and the poor. The book is fast-paced and warm—brimming with Scripture, anecdotes, and practical application.

Keller is the pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan, New York and author of the *New York Times* bestseller, *The Reason for God*. He is an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church in America and holds degrees from Bucknell University (B.A.), Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary (M.Div.), and Westminster Theological Seminary (D.Min.). After pastoring a church in Hopewell, Virginia, he taught at Westminster Theological Seminary before planting Redeemer Presbyterian Church in 1989.

According to Keller, *Generous Justice* was written for four types of people. First, he has witnessed an increased number of young Christian believers who have a great desire to serve in justice ministry. Many of these young adults, however, have a hard time connecting that desire to their Christian faith. Second, Keller targets those Christians who are fearful that any advocacy of social justice is inexorably linked to a loss of sound doctrine and evangelism. The third audience includes those who do, in fact, abandon traditional evangelical doctrines like justification by faith alone and Jesus’ substitutionary atonement as they seek social justice. Finally, he argues against the “new atheism,” which contends that religion is regressive and promotes injustice and violence. The book also contains numerous quotations from philosophers, psychologists, historians, and theologians, which suggests a certain intellectual audience.

The first third of the book is a biblical overview of justice, from creation to Revelation. Being created in the image of God displays his design for human dignity and the reflection of harmonious, peace-filled relationships. Though the Fall in Genesis 3 shattered relationship, it did not negate human dignity and worth. Throughout Scripture, God consistently identifies with the poorest of the poor, the widow, and the orphan. This “identification,” Keller explains, finds its fullest expression in the incarnation, where Christ was born in a feeding trough and would possess no material wealth of his own. He rode on a borrowed donkey into Jerusalem and was buried in a borrowed tomb. God has identified with the outcast and the ostracized fully in the person of Jesus Christ, and calls us to strive for generous justice.

What does “justice” mean? According to Keller, doing justice includes defending people’s rights, identifying with the poor and oppressed, serving the widow and orphan, caring for the victims of unjust treatment, and bringing shalom to broken relationships and communities. Striving for generous justice is not simply a
biblical suggestion, but a biblical command. Indeed, radical generosity is biblical generosity. While salvation is by faith alone, faith doesn’t come alone, and a “key sign” of saving faith is seeking social justice.

The book reveals faults of both political liberals and conservatives in their methods of giving, taxation, and attempts to “fix” the problems of societal injustice. As he doesn’t hold back in challenging conservative churches who only help those who are morally upright and hard working, so also he doesn’t hold back in confronting liberal churches for diminishing the importance of proclaiming the gospel message. Real compassion for the poor and oppressed entails risk and sacrifice, truth and selfless giving.

From cover to cover, Generous Justice is sprinkled with practical application. Keller goes into great detail to explain how doing justice for social change comes from immediate relief, individual and community development, and social reform. He also gives advice on how to work with unbelievers for social justice with “humble cooperation” and “respectful provocation.” He challenges both individuals and churches to live out a radical generosity in a broken and hurting world. Thoughts of helping the homeless or fighting for human equality should constantly be on the mind of every Christian as a response to the grace he or she has been shown in the gospel.

As the book unfolds, it becomes unmistakably clear that Keller seeks a careful balance between justifying faith and doing works of justice. Mercy to the poor and justice ministry are the inevitable signs of faith. He writes, “Grace is the key to it all” (40). The grace of God in Christ Jesus—paying our wages of sin on the cross and crediting us with his perfect record of righteousness—is the foundation and proper motivation for doing justice. He does not hold back the absolute centrality of the gospel for God-glorifying service to the poor and broken.

I have but one criticism of the book in that it seems, at times, unorganized and without direction. Even though each chapter has helpful subtitles dispersed throughout, I found myself asking, “How does this section relate to the chapter?” At other places, he seemed to be jumping from one idea to another without a reasonable flow. Notwithstanding, I heartily recommend this book and applaud Keller’s clear exegesis, his balanced approach, and his passion for social justice. Ultimately, Generous Justice looks unto the generosity of God and his free gift of saving grace to lay “the foundation for the society of justice for all” (40).

Brian H. Cosby
Carriage Lane Presbyterian Church
Peachtree City, Georgia