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The Peacemakers: Navigating the Intersection of  
Biblical Justice and Contemporary Policing

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### Abstract

For Christians seeking to enter the field of policing, the question of justice is answered by two separate sources. Conceptions of justice are presented by both the contemporary justice system and the Bible. The history and current state of American policing reveal a sense of justice that is concerned with fighting crime and defending the rights of the vulnerable. There are, however, inherent limitations when operating within a system made by man. Biblical justice goes further by prioritizing restoration and redeemed relationships within its conception of justice. Reconciling these two perspectives equips Christian police officers with a framework with which they can navigate policing in a way that best glorifies God and effects true justice.

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In Matthew 5:9, Jesus declares, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God” (English Standard Version). In this verse, Jesus asserts a connection that many Christian police officers identify with. It is a connection between a mission of peace and a redeemed relationship with God. Peacemakers can fill different roles on earth, but Christians find a unique opportunity within police agencies. Police are required to meet desperate people in moments of extraordinary need. It is impossible to predict the situations one will encounter at any moment as a police officer. Regardless, they are required to answer the call of duty and risk their lives for the sake of justice.

It is in justice that the police and Christianity share the greatest similarity. Police agencies are formed in order to serve the public and protect it from harm (Hess, Orthmann, & Cho, 2015). When offenses do occur, the police must respond and execute justice. Christians recognize that God is sovereign over all creation, but also that sin has corrupted God’s creation. Christians are thus called to do justice against the evil of the world and in support of the vulnerable, albeit in a manner quite different than police.

A proper understanding of competing conceptions of justice consists of several critical elements, including an analysis of American policing, a biblical definition of justice, and a comparison in order to reconcile these views and inform Christians police officers. In order to understand the mission of justice as seen in contemporary policing, one must look at the meaning and limitations of the law as established by human government. Regarding biblical justice, one must address both Old Testament and New

Testament teachings in order to fully capture God's intended sense of justice and its application to the individual Christian ethic. Finally, these two conceptions of justice must be compared, thus providing a framework with which Christians can most effectively do justice while serving as police officers.

### **The Justice of Man**

In the year 1787, American leaders signed the United States Constitution, which marked the beginning of modern American government. Four years later, the Bill of Rights was adopted in order to better secure the rights of individuals. At the top of this formative documents reads, "We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice," (U.S. Const. pmb1.) followed by other initiatives meant to preserve and edify the newly formed nation. The Bill of Rights further sought to benefit the public against the potential abuses of government. Notably, the first action listed in an effort towards a perfect union is the establishment of justice. Justice serves as the foundation of the United States government and is a virtue that has continued to guide the nation.

Of course, the justice spoken of in this phrase goes beyond the field of criminal justice. It refers to the government's goal of securing equal opportunity and protection for all of its people. The criminal justice system plays a critical role in this, however, as law is used as a medium through which government maintains and pursues its mission (Wilcox, 1898). Through an understanding of American policing and its pursuit of justice, one can develop a framework with which to consider the role of individual officers within the grand scheme of justice. Thus, this section will examine the history of

American policing, including the efforts and obstacles to justice, as well as the philosophy of modern policing. Studying the progress of policing will provide a better context for the analysis of how justice as a virtue has guided police agencies in the service of their communities. Finally, justice as set forth by human law will be considered, particularly regarding its ability to maintain the balance of law and order while preserving individual liberties.

### **History of Policing**

The study of contemporary views on justice is, of course, primarily focused on the practices of modern police agencies. Although the history of policing is important, it has limited bearing on the overall mission and the daily operations of police personnel. As such, heavy consideration is not placed on the inception and evolution of ideology and policing methods in the United States. However, a brief overview of the developments of police agencies will provide a basic context that will aid in understanding modern policing efforts. Furthermore, examining this development will highlight the issues encountered during each era of policing and the ways that these issues were overcome. This will, in turn, help reveal the evolution of American policing and how contemporary ideas of policing and justice came to be.

**Overview of American policing.** The beginning of American policing followed British models of social control in which government bodies sought to regulate the behavior of local groups (Cox, Marchionna, & Fitch, 2017). In larger populations such as New York and Boston, watch systems were enacted to prevent criminal activity, though these efforts did little to build community relations or gain the trust of the public

(Steverson, 2008). Because these groups had little organization or regulation, citizens armed themselves in response to growing concerns of crime. In the South, vigilante groups seeking to control slave populations represented early models of policing (Alexis-Baker, 2007). As America progressed into the 1800s, police forces evolved from rudimentary night watches into relatively organized bodies. However, these departments generally lacked uniform standards of appearance or training and were often plagued by political influence and corruption. Eventually activist groups worked towards reform and led to efforts for greater police effectiveness. The 1800s also saw the creation of state- and federal-level police agencies to combat criminal issues associated with increasing industrialization and expansion (Hess, Orthmann, & Cho, 2015).

A new generation of policing began in the early 1900s as police departments developed new methods of fighting crime such as specialized squads, widespread motorized transportation, forensic science, as well as a new attitude of professionalism (Steverson, 2008). The police became more incorporated into society and held a strong role within communities, much more so than the unsophisticated watch systems of earlier emerging cities. Issues such as prostitution, gambling, and drugs were growing concerns within cities, so police agencies appropriately updated their methods to serve these continually evolving communities.

The evolution of police agencies in relation to society is especially apparent during the 1950s and 1960s. Nationwide crises such as the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights Movement required the police to respond both to increasing fears of crime and to increasing tension between officers and progressive groups (Balko, 2014). Police adapted

to fears of crime by enacting “wars” on drugs and poverty. The growing effort to “get tough on crime” manifested itself in increases of both the frequency and duration of punishments for various crimes (Nelson, 2013). Meanwhile, the era of community policing was beginning, in which police prioritized having a strong role and positive presence in the community (Chriss, 2016). New initiatives considered ways in which police could prevent crime through community empowerment and involvement rather than simply responding to crime. Also known as problem-solving or problem-oriented policing, agencies considered new theories such as “broken windows” policing that would allow for proactive measures and a perspective of police officers as public servants rather than crime-fighting soldiers (Cox et al., 2017).

There is one final development in American policing that must be identified for the sake of a proper account of history. There was a dramatic shift in the mission of criminal justice organizations following the events of September 11, 2001. These terrorist attacks led to a complete redesign of American defense that effected changes within the military, transportation, and law enforcement (Hess et al., 2015). Although it is important to note the increase in homeland security efforts at every level of government, the role of individual police officers has only been added onto, not redefined. Therefore, homeland security developments pertaining to police agencies at local and state levels will not be addressed.

**Historical issues and developments.** Throughout the course of American policing, various issues have hindered police in their ability to serve and protect their communities. These issues are generally unique to a particular era, and each must have



been or must be resolved in order for American policing to evolve as an institution.

Furthermore, these issues help to clarify the role of police within each respective era. One of the first problems is observed at the beginning of America. Early police forces were generally disorganized and lacked an effective system of accountability and allocation of resources (Walker & Archbold, 2014). The watch systems employed by early cities had very little structure, which often left their agents free to spend their time intoxicated or idle (Steverson, 2008). However, local governments eventually improved upon this by establishing agencies with clear structure. The problem with these new agencies is that, although they had some sense of organization, there was little legitimate education or training. In order to grow, agencies had to equip officers with uniform qualifications and ability.

As further improvements were made and police agencies became more integrated in society throughout the 1900s, police had to address the unfortunate stains of racial discrimination (Skolnick & Fyfe, 1993). Through legal and social changes, the issue of racism was also diminished. Even now, however, racial bias can present itself as an unforeseen issue in even the most well-intentioned officers (McKenna, 2010). Another hindrance to police goals is the employment of “get tough on crime” policies. As mentioned, this attitude has led to a modern system of high incarceration and high recidivism. Nelson (2013) suggested that the over-emphasis on punishing offenders has resulted in a situation in which the criminal justice system ignores the results of its action in favor of following “tough on crime” procedures.

The purpose of examining these issues is to understand how American policing has developed and led to its current state. The disorganization of watch systems and lack of uniformity within early agencies has been remedied to produce modern agencies that maintain high standards of organization, training, and officer accountability. However, it is also important to remain aware of unresolved problems such as implicit racial bias and excessive punishment and how these issues affect the daily pursuit of justice within individual officers.

### **Contemporary Policing**

As detailed in previous sections, community policing is the trademark of modern agencies and serves as the primary context for examining modern police work. Police seek to build relationships with communities and, in doing so, ensure the safety and well-being of the population. In a survey of 48 major police agencies, all but seven made a direct reference to community policing (DeLone, 2007). The motto “To protect and to serve” was first held by the Los Angeles Police Department but is now almost universally associated with police as an institution. Criminal justice currently holds a strong focus on ideas such as these. The question then arises, what is goal of contemporary police agencies? When discussing the pursuit of justice, how is justice defined by these organizations?

**Police aims and methods.** The term *police* is generally used to refer to a body tasked with the maintenance of law and order in a certain jurisdiction. It is also used as a verb to describe the act of regulating behavior. A significant detriment to law and order is, of course, crime. From the early days of the watch system to modern systems of patrol

and surveillance, police agencies have worked to combat crime in hopes of maintaining peace and security within communities. The methods of achieving this have changed throughout history, but the goal has remained the same. It is through law and order that communities are able to develop and society is able to grow. With this in mind, the community policing approach is simply a new iteration of law and order. Rather than ruling with an iron fist, police agencies are using a model of openness and communication to deal with societal problems. Police have realized the significance of local populations and individuals as stakeholders in societal well-being, and now seek to bring communities together to pursue common goals of peace and security (Rukus, Warner, & Zhang, 2018).

The community policing model has significant impact on criminal justice as a whole. Properly understanding community policing will grant an understanding of not only policing as a field, but also how the daily operations of individual officers are focused. Three common features of community include police-community partnerships, a problem-solving approach to community issues, and organizational decentralization of agencies (Somerville, 2009). Of the three, the police-community partnership is the primary feature of this model. This has led some departments to establish entire units or divisions dedicated to building relationships with the communities of which they have already had a significant part. However, in order for community policing to have its desired effect, the relational role of police must be played by every officer in the department. Relationships between the police and the community require time to

gradually develop, especially in areas marked by high crime and low levels of trust in the police.

**Justice as the underlying virtue.** Having identified the predominant model of contemporary policing and examined the intended role of police within a community, it is important to consider the purpose of policing in general. If police agencies have adopted community policing as the means toward law and order, what is the underlying reason for these methods and values? The answer is, quite simply, justice. The purpose of criminal justice organizations is to pursue and to do justice.

The role that certain aspects of the criminal justice system play is relatively clear; the courts administer justice through the interpretation of law and the charging of offenders, and correctional agencies administer justice through the application of punishments and rehabilitation efforts (Hess et al., 2015). The police, however, play a role that is more obscure. Of course, the job of law enforcement agencies is to enforce the law, but the duties of police officers go beyond merely identifying offenders and arresting them for judgment. Indeed, many have identified that much, if not most, of police work involves social work and crisis management, rather than the direct application of law (Ewert, 2008). Thus, police officers go beyond the role mandated by the cycle of criminal justice and have significant opportunity to interact and serve in ways that go beyond mere law enforcement.

In order to understand what potential for justice-oriented action police officers have, one must first understand what sense of justice is being sought. In Western society, justice is generally marked by the coinciding elements of balance and retribution

(Grimsrud & Zehr, 2002). First, there is a natural balance that must be maintained. This essentially comes down to an idea similar to that of karma in Eastern philosophies. If an individual commits a bad deed against another, then they will be punished. The punishment makes up the second element of justice, which is retribution. The idea of retribution is first seen in the idea of *lex talionis*, which basically equates to “eye for an eye”. Variations of this model of justice can be seen in the ancient laws of Israel, Babylon, Rome, and other societies. Another aspect of justice is impartiality. This is represented by the blindfold on the traditional Lady Justice. The impartiality of justice guarantees that no individual will receive preference based on class, race, education, or any other characteristic. Although concerns such as racial bias may appear to undermine this idea, equal protection under the law remains an important aspect of justice in the government’s effort to best serve its people (Wilcox, 1898).

By understanding this sense of justice as defined by the criminal justice system, individual police officers gain a larger framework for daily operations and interactions with the public. Of course, justice as a virtue will be taught to police during their training and represented in policy and procedure. However, when practical training and the minutiae of procedure end or, in some cases, do not align with what one knows to be true justice, this framework will guide individuals in the proper treatment of offenders, victims, witnesses, and the general public.

### **Limitations of Man’s Justice**

The foundations of liberty and justice in America were established even before the founding of the nation, yet American policing has seen and continues to see not only

incidents, but also entire eras in which the high standards of justice are violated (Balko, 2014). One might explain away unfortunate breaches of police virtue by saying that men are imperfect and individuals will never cease to commit isolated incidents in which justice is violated. This reasoning, however, is flawed and ignores the fallibility of man's law. Certain individuals, especially those who express high favor towards the police, seek to defend the virtue of both the law and criminal justice as an institution. Although it is healthy to support the mission of law and order, one must remain at least somewhat critical of these institutions. A failure to recognize flaws and inherent limitations of a system is a failure to grow and learn from the issues that hinder progress. As such, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of justice as set forth by American law and the criminal justice system.

One of the primary limitations of law that is established by men is that it is unable to deeply change an individual's moral behavior (Bounds, 2015). This applies to both sides of the criminal justice system. The selfishness that drives criminals to steal from the vulnerable is the same selfishness that leads individuals in positions of authority to abuse their power for personal gain, simply expressed to different degrees. This hindrance might also help to explain why recidivism rates remain very high. Regardless, the idea that criminal law cannot produce good behavior is not a foreign idea. In fields such as philosophy, statements of fact or declarations are considered invalid determiners of human action and morality. Simply declaring murder to be illegal does not end murder, nor does an oath that law will be executed impartially prevent all incidents of police misconduct. The overarching idea is that mankind's standard of justice and the law by

which it is established is limited in its ability to affect human behavior. Because of this, human attempts towards justice will all fail at some point. This, however, is not an ennui-driven, woeful digression on the fallibility of mankind, but is instead an important warning that must be heeded. As was mentioned earlier, the naiveté of hopeful new officers can often develop into unforeseen problems such as biases and an ignorance towards behavioral issues (McKenna, 2010).

Besides human morality, modern conceptions of justice face issues of procedure. This is not referring to procedural law, but the general focus of criminal justice. As mentioned earlier, the “get tough on crime” attitude allowed justice to be obscured in favor of efficiency and results. The emphasis on procedure over outcomes resulted in a style of “assembly line” justice that perpetuates inequality and injustice by ignoring the individuality of people’s situations (Noakes-Duncan, 2016). Although this tends to be more of an institutional issue, it is unwise to think that the flaws of an institution do not affect its individual agents, in this case being criminal justice professionals including law enforcement officers. After all, it is the police that grant offenders entry into the criminal justice system. This is not to say that police should refrain from enforcing the law out of fear of institutional injustice, but that officers should be aware of the ease with which justice can be distorted in the name of efficiency and results.

### **Final Considerations**

Throughout American history, policing has developed dramatically and has shown strong progress in overcoming former problems in order to better serve the community. These developments have ranged from simply increasing organization and

uniformity to addressing issues of race and class. The account of American policing is very inspiring in its ability to demonstrate responsiveness and problem-solving in an effort to effect true justice. The current state of policing indicates progress towards positive community relations unlike have previously been seen. This further means that individual officers are in a strong position to serve the public in a way that best promotes peace, liberty, and justice within the community. However, examining the criminal justice system and modern policing also reveals the limitations of justice as established by the law. The imperfections of policing and its intended sense of justice allude to a higher standard that must be found somewhere else.

### **The Justice of God**

For Christians, the failure of human models of justice does not cause concern, but instead draws attention to a biblical reality. Christians are already aware of the fallen state of humanity and the ways in which sin has corrupted the world. This awareness explains the hopefulness that expressed in Romans 8:18, “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.” However, one must also understand that Christians have an important role in the world, despite its eventual end. God created man with a particular place and work in the creation order, so man must strive to meet God’s calling (Reid, 1952).

When considering what role Christians have in policing, it is important to first examine the meaning of justice according to the Bible. Although man’s conception of justice generally resembles biblical standards of justice, there are key components that have been changed or ignored by contemporary criminal justice systems. In order to



compare the justice of modern policing with the justice of God, this section will examine both Old Testament and New Testament standards of justice. Unlike the justice found in human law, biblical justice plays an integral role in God's character, creation, and his plan of salvation.

Finally, this section will examine the role of the individual in executing God's justice and how this applies to daily life. These considerations will permit a comparison between contemporary criminal justice and biblical justice that will ultimately allow Christians to identify their role in modern day justice efforts such as policing. This examination will be practical in nature, as opposed to being concerned with abstract theology, which frequently only benefits lofty thinkers rather than involved citizens.

### **Old Testament Teachings**

When many individuals consider the Old Testament, they think of God as being harsh and violent. He murders countless innocents for seemingly no purpose. He destroys entire cities without a second thought. He cares only for his own people, yet he kills them, too. Upon closer inspection and critical reading, this is not found to be the case. In fact, the Old Testament describes God in opposite terms. He is said to be, "merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love," (Psalm 103:8). The Old Testament is an important source of information regarding biblical justice as it deals with some of most unjust periods of humanity, including the very beginning of evil within all of creation (Sprinkle, 2013).

The origin of biblical justice on earth can be found at the beginning of the Bible. Upon completion of his creation, God declares it to be good (Genesis 1:31). There is

peace throughout all of creation without the disruption of evil. It is a state of harmony. However, this is soon interrupted. In the third chapter of Genesis, man disobeys God and sin enters the world. It is here that God's justice is first revealed to man. Man's sin causes an unbalance and corrupts the goodness of creation and, in his justice, God condemns the guilty parties. This condemnation, however, begins to reveal that which is special about the sense of justice characterized by God. In his reaction to the serpent, God shows his absolute hatred toward evil and makes no allowance for it. He declares that, "[the woman's offspring] shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel," (Genesis 3:15). In this statement, God not only declares the serpent to be evil, but also foreshadows a future day when God's justice will be fully revealed in the work of Jesus Christ. What is important to note in this chapter, however, is God's reaction to Adam and Eve. Whereas God casts off evil with warnings of its ultimate demise, he responded in love to his creation. Because of his justice, God could not overlook man's sin, but because of his love, God did not simply condemn man to merciless death. Instead, God cares for his creation, and in Genesis 3:21 it says that God went as far as to provide Adam and Eve with clothing to accommodate their newfound nakedness. God's justice is not vindictive, but redemptive. Grimsrud and Zehr (2002) explained that, according to God, "justice is how love is expressed in the face of evil" (p. 266). He does not dismiss charges, but instead seeks to redeem and restore men to relationship with himself. It is within this passage that the entire foundation of biblical justice is laid.

Whereas the Fall dealt directly with the relationship between God and mankind, the Noahic Covenant marks the beginning of God executing his will through more

indirect means, in this case being human government (Genesis 8:20-9:17). Humanity's evil was so rampant that God destroyed nearly all of mankind and started a new covenant with his creation. One of the primary tools for executing his justice was the institution of capital punishment that was intended to prevent humanity from returning to previous levels of sin (Hindson & Yates, 2012). This serves as a point of reference for Paul's discussion on submission to government in Romans 13. Paul refers to the government as "the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer" (Romans 13:4). Viewing capital punishment as a tool of God's justice affirms both the seriousness of biblical justice as well as the diversity with which God is able to execute his will.

The next major point of study for Old Testament justice is the Mosaic Law. These laws are the basis of morality and justice for Israel until the coming of Jesus. Many critics of Judeo-Christian ethics cite harsh Mosaic commands in order to discredit this way of life. For example, "You shall not permit a sorceress to live," (Exodus 22:18) evokes imagery similar to that of the witch trials of early colonial America. However, these assertions of cruelty ignore the context of these laws. In light of the excessively violent culture of this time period, these laws were intended to guide Israel toward God's ideal for just living, rather than represent God's true desires for mankind (Sprinkle, 2013). Compared to the brutality of Israel's neighboring nations, Mosaic Law was a radically different and more peaceful way of life that was hinted to a more perfect standard of living that would be later realized.

Even with some of the more violent commands, the Law presented a much stronger model of justice than had otherwise been seen in the world. It was a realistic

model for that time period that anticipated the continued failure of human morality and provided means through which offenders could be dealt with (Jeschke, 1984). Restitution and restoration are common themes that were intended to promote justice by balancing the effects of an offense. For example, if an individual causes the death of another man's livestock, the offender must pay the owner the price of the animal (Exodus 21:33-34). Furthermore, these methods of restitution worked for justice on both the part of the offender and the victim. The principle of "life for life, eye for eye" (Exodus 21:23-25) was not merely a provision for punishment, but also a protection for the offender against excessive punishment. By limiting the punishment for an offense to an equal consequence, Old Testament law prohibited personal vengeance from corrupting legitimate justice. Elements such as this demonstrate how God intended and supported a model of justice that was uniquely concerned with the preservation of human life and relationships. Unlike other models of justice that are focused primarily on repayment and procedure, biblical justice displays elements of restoration, as well as a priority on right relationships over right rules (Northey, 1998).

One final point of significance is the dual purpose of justice given in Mosaic law. As demonstrated in the "eye for eye" principle, biblical justice seeks to preserve both the victim as well as the offender. Mosaic Law goes further by seeking to protect the vulnerable within society. Keller (2011) explained this duality, noting that there is a negative aspect of law in which people are to be stopped from doing bad things, as well as a positive aspect of law in which people are commanded to help the oppressed, the weak, and the vulnerable. The negative aspect of Mosaic Law is readily apparent in

commands such as “Whoever strikes a man so that he dies shall be put to death,” (Exodus 21:12). The positive aspect, although less prominent, occurs in the same general discourse. For example, Mosaic laws regarding social justice emphatically prohibit the mistreatment of foreigners, orphans, and widows (Exodus 22:21-24). Biblical justice requires not only that evil be stopped, but that good be actively done.

### **New Testament Teachings**

When considering the role of justice within a biblical worldview, many people look to the Old Testament and cite Mosaic Law to explain God’s vision for justice. This is interesting because whereas Mosaic Law was intended to meet the people of Israel in a harsh and violent context in order to guide them towards God’s ideal, the New Testament holds the coming of Jesus and, in him, God’s perfect justice embodied on earth (Sprinkle, 2013). This was foretold in the proto-evangelium of Genesis 3:15 as well as messianic prophecies that speak of Jesus coming to earth with names such as “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace,” (Isaiah 9:6). The coming of Jesus is the primary focus of the entire New Testament and serves as a turning point in salvation history. The importance of Jesus’s life to the discussion of justice is twofold: First, Jesus’s death and resurrection fulfilled the requirements of God’s justice, thus securing salvation for those who follow him. Second, Jesus’s work and interactions with others give a perfect model of what a life of justice should look like on a daily basis.

Following the work of Jesus, the New Testament gives a clearer description of the course of humanity and God’s plan of salvation. The Apostle Paul outlines the fallen

nature of mankind and how God's justice responds. A concise description of this timeline is provided in the book of Romans:

For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. (Romans 3:23-25)

Because this is a commonly heard passage within Christianity, it is easy to overlook the implications that this holds regarding justice. In fact, this passage demonstrates how God's justice was fulfilled perfectly through Jesus following the same model as is used for general criminal proceedings. First, there is an offense committed against an individual. In this case, the offense is man's sin against God. In order for justice to be achieved, there must be a consequence and payment to restore the balance of this offense. The consequence of man's sin is separation from God, which results in death. The radical aspect of God's justice, however, is the form of payment. In his righteousness and sovereignty, God has every right to immediately send humanity into damnation. Instead, a different form of payment is provided: Jesus as a propitiation. Through Jesus, the price of sin is paid, and God's justice is satisfied.

Besides the obvious significance of salvation and what this means to Christians, there is a very important principle relevant to God's justice, which is the inclusion of love. "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son," (John 3:16). Through his sacrifice, Jesus transcended every model and instance of justice by placing love and relationship over retribution. The condemnation of humanity was perfectly fair, yet God in his perfect justice sought a redemptive alternative. It is by grace that God redeems, but

his redemption comes by means of justice (Reid, 1952). Of course, offering oneself as a payment for the crime of another is not a normal practice in the proceedings of human justice, nor is it necessarily acceptable. However, considering God's perfect nature, it is important to identify love as an element of perfect justice.

Besides the plan of salvation history, Jesus's life on earth provides an important illustration of what it looks like to live a life of justice. This is accomplished both through his teachings as well as his actions. One of the primary sources of Jesus's teachings is the Sermon on the Mount, in which Jesus delivers teaching regarding many different topics, all of which are centered around the gospel. It is here that Jesus's standard for justice and just living are most easily seen.

It was said earlier that the Mosaic Law of the Old Testament was not God's ideal but was instead intended to point Israel towards his perfect standard (Sprinkle, 2013). During the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus illustrates this idea by giving new commandments. These commandments are not new in the sense that they are foreign ideas to his listeners, rather, Jesus's teachings give a modernized and fuller sense of the former laws. For example, Jesus addresses the "eye for eye" principle of Exodus 21 by saying that, "if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also," (Matthew 5:39). This appears to be in stark contrast with the Old Testament principle. However, rather than contrast, Jesus's teaching serves as a higher teaching that is closer to God's will than the previous instruction of retribution.

Within this section, Jesus also continues the idea of the duality of justice. Not only does Jesus speak on offenses such as anger, lust, and divorce which make up the

negative side of executing justice, but he also speaks regarding the positive side of executing justice. For example, Jesus develops the idea of caring for the vulnerable (Exodus 22:21-24) by adding the element of humility, warning against “practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them,” (Matthew 6:1). In doing so, individuals draw nearer to God’s sense of justice which leads to serving others out of love rather than selfish desire.

Throughout his life on earth, Jesus went beyond teaching and lived a life of love and justice. He regularly opposed evil and defended the vulnerable. Due to his perfect character, Jesus expressed justice in both his severity and his mercy towards those with whom he interacted (Aiken, 2014). This is especially evident in Jesus’s interactions with the Pharisees, who represented the evil of corrupted religion. Although Jesus acted in love at all times, this does not prevent him from confronting the Pharisees and calling them names such as “hypocrites”, “blind guides”, “full of hypocrisy and lawlessness”, “serpents”, and a “brood of vipers” (Matthew 23:13-33). Jesus, the Son of God and Prince of Peace, directly and bluntly opposes the hypocrisy and corrupt ways of the Pharisees. Meanwhile, he defended those who were most vulnerable, even those who were otherwise guilty of crimes. This is best demonstrated in the story of the woman caught in adultery (John 8:1-11). After the Pharisees found a woman guilty of a serious crime, they brought her before Jesus. Had Jesus held the “get tough on crime” attitude of many modern conservatives, he might have condoned the stoning of this woman. However, Jesus instead showed mercy and fought to preserve the life and well-being of the defenseless woman before him. According to most models of criminal justice, Jesus



likely would have been considered guilty of obstruction of justice. However, Jesus already established himself as perfect and capable of executing perfect justice. Therefore, there is an important element of loving mercy that must be included in biblical justice, rather than the retributive goal of immediately convicting and punishing every offender.

Through his teaching and his actions, Jesus demonstrated both God's ultimate plan of justice, as well as what it means to live a life of justice. Jesus executed justice by opposing the evil and defending the vulnerable. In his defense of the vulnerable, Jesus did not tolerate sin, but instead sought to redeem the individual rather than blindly following impartial procedures of condemnation. Jesus especially demonstrated that while true, biblical justice is concerned with balance and payment for crime, it is also primarily concerned with love and the restoration of right relationships.

### **Biblical Justice and the Individual**

For the sake of this discussion, defining and understanding justice is pointless if it is unable to produce a personal ethic. In developing this ethic, one must consider the teachings of both the Old Testament and the New Testament regarding justice. Principles from Mosaic Law and their fulfillment through Jesus Christ will best inform the daily lives of Christians seeking to do justice. First, one must have a desire to do justice. For Christians, this desire comes from the realization and acknowledgement that God is sovereign over all the world and all morality (Reid, 1952). From this foundation, biblical teaching can be practically applied to an individual's relationships and interactions with others.

One of the primary teachings on living out biblical justice comes from the book of Micah: “And what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God” (6:8). The Hebrew word for justice in this verse is *mishpat*, which means to give to people what is due (Keller, 2011). This verse reinforces the earlier ideas of the positive and negative aspects of doing justice by mandating this of followers of God. Justice is no longer an abstract theory, but a reality that must be lived out. An important passage regarding justice as a livelihood comes from the book of Job. As Job pleads with God, he points out the ways in which he has lived a life of faithfulness to God. He lists out virtuous things he has done, including giving to the poor, caring for the widow and orphan, and giving clothes to those in need (Job 31:16-22). However, Job does not list these actions as if they are done out of charity. Instead, he regards them as necessary duties associated with his faithfulness to God. It is in this way that Christians are called to live out justice in their lives. It is unlikely that most people are in a position to stop serious criminals, but virtually everyone has the opportunity to execute justice on a smaller scale. There is ample opportunity to help the vulnerable by giving to the poor and providing care for victims of crime or, as the Bible repeatedly instructs, caring for the widow and the orphan.

Overall, the discussion of biblical justice and the individual Christian’s role within it can be summarized in what Jesus calls the greatest commandment:

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like

it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets. (Matthew 22:37-40)

According to 1 John 4:8, God is love. Everything that God does is done out of love, including the execution of justice. By prioritizing loving God and loving others, Christians will inevitably do justice, as this a product of love. To repeat Grimsrud and Zehr (2002), “justice is how love is expressed in the face of evil” (p. 266). By following this commandment of Jesus, Christians will remain in a position in which justice becomes a lifestyle rather than a piece of abstract theology.

### **Christianity and Policing**

Christians who seek to work or currently work as police officers must approach the position with biblical truth in order to confidently and securely fill their role as servants of both God and the public. Previous discussions about human and biblical conceptions of justice must first be reconciled to determine what type of justice is truly being pursued. Furthermore, Christians must consider if and how the role of police officer will better enable them to do justice. The results of these questions will ultimately provide the framework through which Christians can confidently and effectively follow God’s will in a police role.

### **Reconciling Models of Justice**

Comparing human conceptions of justice as represented by contemporary policing and biblical justice as established by God and fulfilled through Jesus, there are many similarities between the two. Justice tends to contain several universal elements such as balance, peace, and impartiality. The body that executes justice does so for the well-being

of its populace. Furthermore, justice is most frequently executed by individuals operating within the system. These similarities are to be expected, as much of Western legal thought has roots in Judeo-Christian tradition.

There are, however, significant differences between contemporary justice and biblical justice. It is in these differences that Christians and non-Christians begin to separate within their fields. Man's justice maintains a focus on law and order. It seeks to establish and guard a status quo in which people are able to freely live and pursue their own objectives. While this is desirable and honorable from a human perspective, it ultimately reflects the fallen nature that was brought upon humanity by sin. Justice is pursued out of self-preservation. Biblical justice has a much higher aim. Its focus is on the God from whom goodness flows. In executing his perfect justice, God rightfully brings glory back to himself. As his creation, Christians recognize that it is their duty to honor and glorify him (Aiken, 2014). Instead of self-preservation biblical justice seeks to fulfill Jesus's greatest commandment to love God by means of loving and seeking justice for others. This commandment holds another element that distinguishes biblical justice. Love is the driving force behind God's actions and must therefore be the foundation of Christian action.

The Christian police officer must recognize that although the call to protect and serve the public is noble, it falls short of the call for justice found in God's Word. Thus, the Christian police officer must look for ways in which he can exceed secular justice in order to follow God's will. Referring back to the positive and negative aspects of justice, the negative aspect of opposing evil comes naturally with the role of police officer. The

police are called to respond to and intervene in situations in which the desolation of man is most apparent. Yet even in the fight against evil, the Christian police officer must remain critical of his own actions, as Christians are also called to love not only their neighbors, but also their enemies (Matthew 5:43-44). In what ways can one love homeless drug addicts or individuals driven by desperation to the point of theft while also fulfilling the job requirements of law enforcement? One should again consider the story of the woman caught in adultery. Jesus, the living embodiment of God's holiness and justice, defended a vulnerable woman against those who sought to punish her for a legitimate crime. This is not to suggest that the Christian police officer should disobey specific departmental policies or neglect his duty. However, if one seeks to elevate the justice of God to its rightful place, then these issues must be considered.

### **Compatibility of Christianity and Police**

One final important question must be answered before Christians can work as police without contradicting their faith. The answer to this question is already somewhat implied by the results of this discussion, but it is still a question that many Christians face when considering a career with the police. Based on the research gathered and examined regarding themes of justice and police work, Christians can and should pursue careers as police officers.

The message of the gospel has the potential to dramatically shape both individuals and society for the better. In fact, part of the work of the Church is shape the culture through gentle yet forceful persuasion (Charles, 1995). This includes being involved in a multitude of different vocational fields. One point of hesitation is that a Christian may be

unable to share the message of the gospel when working in particular fields. While it is true that the law does not permit police to openly share personal beliefs or to use their status as a forum for religion (Schott, 2007), this does not negate the importance of Christians working within police agencies. This is because the work of the gospel goes beyond mere preaching. Of course, it is the hearing of the Word that leads to salvation, but that does not diminish the role of service-oriented positions. This is illustrated in the selection of men to serve in the early Church. From the body of believers, seven were chosen specifically to meet the material needs of those whom the Church was serving (Acts 6:1-7). By selecting these men, the leaders of the Church were able to resume preaching.

Another reason why Christians should be police officers is because the police are in a unique position to do justice. The Church and various faith-based organizations share many of the same values as police (Bullock & Johnson, 2018). As such, Christians serving as police officers are able to meet the immediate needs of people experiencing severe crises. By being available to the public in moments of need, Christians can effectively live out the call to do justice in a way that ultimately serves to glorify God. Therefore, Christians should pursue police careers and strive to serve as representatives of God's justice.

### **Conclusion**

As has been explained, the justice of man and the justice of God are not in contrast, but instead are better explained as different degrees of the same virtue. Contemporary policing prioritizes law and order and can overlook the personal aspect of

justice. However, police still seek to oppose evil and support those in need. Biblical justice is similar, but is fully realized when the element of love is incorporated. Although this may initially appear to be a hyper-emotional approach that overemphasizes feelings, an examination of salvation history within the Bible demonstrates that love is guiding principle by which justice is executed. The model of justice that God commands of Christians seeks to oppose evil as well as serve and defend the vulnerable. It is only when both of these elements are displayed that justice can truly be realized.

The purpose of comparing these two conceptions of justice is to provide a framework with which Christians can most effectively navigate the field of policing. Christian police officers must strive to understand God's justice and his commands to love and to serve in order to elevate their role from agents of governmental justice to divinely-guided peacemakers who look to God as their model of true justice. This is, of course, a difficult task in an already difficult field. However, if Christians serving as police officers seek after the power and wisdom of God in an effort to do justice as God prescribed, they shall be called sons of God.

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