

**Reading Romans in Hurricane-Ravaged Honduras:
A Model of Intercultural and Interdisciplinary Conversation**

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This article displays an interactive approach of contextual Bible study by bringing the reader into the discussion between a Bible scholar and people at the grassroots as mediated by a missionary in Honduras. Description of the rich dialog about passages on the righteousness of God in Romans displays how all involved, Bible scholar, missionary and church members, gained new insights as they wrestled with pastoral and theological challenges caused by Hurricane Mitch. The authors both model an approach of dialogical Bible study and list methodological insights for other missionaries engaging in contextual Bible study.

INTRODUCTION

What is the relationship between Bible scholar, missionary and people at the grassroots? Commonly it has been understood and practiced as a one-way relationship. The Bible scholar, through teaching and commentaries, informs the missionary of the meaning of the text, and the missionary instructs people at the grassroots. Within some circles of biblical scholarship today the flow is exactly the opposite. Some biblical scholars take a stance of listener only and are reticent to challenge interpretations rising from the grassroots. In this collaborative project, however, we argue that an approach of interaction and conversation is superior to either of the above approaches for all of the parties involved.

The term “conversation” aptly describes what we have intended to foster by undertaking this project. We are convinced that biblical interpretation requires serious engagement with readers from a multiplicity of social locations different from one’s own, in which each reader is willing to learn from, as well as offer insight to, the others. In his book, *Cultural Interpretation*, Brian Blount argues convincingly for such an approach, showing that

one’s sociohistorical context influences what one sees in the language [of the text]. Every investigative exercise, historical-critical and literary included, has a powerful interpersonal component. Only when that component is acknowledged can one begin the process of controlling it, not through the establishment of a direct speech [i.e., an “objective” or “neutral” way of accessing the text], but through an awareness that one’s interpretative conclusions are sociolinguistically biased. Such an awareness induces an investigator to invite, and subsequently accept analectically,¹ input from other sociolinguistic perspectives (1995: 39).

In both the field research for this paper and in its writing, faithfulness to this ideal of reading-in-conversation has remained our goal, however far we may be deemed to have fallen short of it.²

¹That is, through a process of appropriation and incorporation, rather than through a process of opposition and exclusion.

² It is obvious that the very process of summarizing these conversations is an act of interpretation no less

Blount eloquently describes the fruitfulness of this type of dialogical reading:

We see that when ethnographic and popular interpreters approach the texts with a conscious interpersonal agenda, new information constantly bursts on the scene, leading to meanings that push beyond the textual and ideational boundaries established by mainline scholarship. When these conclusions are analectically engaged, a process occurs whereby the full richness of the text begins to be more clearly opened, and we can see how the text comes to life in a new way in a new circumstance.... We want to promote an analectical engagement of interpersonal conclusions so that the rich potentiality of a text's meaning can be more fully appreciated (1995:85-86).

Part One of our paper describes and analyzes the conversations that took place in Honduras between Mark Baker and a number of groups of Honduran Christians during the period 25 June to 8 July 2000. Part Two then offers further analysis on the implications of this experience for missionaries. Although Mark is the primary author of Part One of this article, the entire study is a collaborative effort, the fruit of numerous stimulating and enjoyable conversations.

PART ONE

READING ROMANS IN HONDURAS: A CROSS-CULTURAL CONVERSATION

I. FLOR DEL CAMPO AND HURRICANE MITCH

A. The Hurricane

On Friday, 30 October 1998, the rains beat down on the tin roofs of Flor del Campo, one of the numerous squatter neighborhoods dotting the hills surrounding Tegucigalpa, the capital of Honduras.³ As throughout Tegucigalpa, the poorest in Flor del Campo live in places considered uninhabitable a decade ago. Their shacks cling to steep embankments and line the small river at the edge of the neighborhood. On that stormy October day, those dwelling on the river-banks saw the river rising and began carrying possessions to higher ground. Those who lived a hundred yards or so from the river watched this procession--grateful that they lived out of the river's reach. But the water began to attain heights never seen before, and by nightfall the river was surging into their homes also. They fled, and soon the walls of their houses were smashed by the raging torrent.

subject to our own cultural biases than that of reading a text. We necessarily reframe another's thoughts in terms that make sense to us. This fact does not, however, preclude a real exchange of ideas between people or across cultures (for the significance of this insight for cross-cultural studies, see the perceptive discussion of "interpretive sociology" by Nancy Jay in *Throughout Your Generations Forever: Sacrifice, Religion, and Paternity* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992] xxv-xxvi, 13-14). Recognizing the difficulties of representing our Honduran interlocutors fairly, we nevertheless commit ourselves to a "hermeneutic of love" which seeks as far as possible to understand and articulate another's perspective in terms they would find acceptable (on the rationale for such a dialogical approach to interpretation, see further D. Patte, *The Challenge of Discipleship* [Harrisburg, Pa: Trinity Press International, 1999] 52-54; N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992] 50-64).

³ Over 15,000 people make Flor del Campo their home.

By the time the waters began to recede on Saturday, about one hundred fifty families from Flor del Campo were added to the list of thousands of “*damnificados*”--those who had lost their homes. Yet as many pointed out, to some degree most everyone in Tegucigalpa, if not all Honduras, was *damnificado*. Most were without water and electricity. Many found themselves jobless because Mitch had destroyed their place of employment. Students could not go to classes. If their school still stood, it was now filled with families who had lost their homes. Most bridges had been damaged or destroyed. Tegucigalpa was cut off from the rest of the country.

B. God and Mitch

Why all this death, destruction, and suffering?⁴ A common, if not the most common, answer to be heard in Tegucigalpa was that God had sent the hurricane to punish Honduras.⁵ Some pointed to the rampant corruption in the society in general and in the government in particular. Others spoke of the increasing levels of drug use and drug trafficking, or God’s desire to wipe out pockets of satanism and witchcraft. Still others stated that God had sent Mitch as a warning to Hondurans to turn back to God, or they would face something even worse on the day of judgment. Many evangelicals saw the hurricane as a direct response to the huge statue of Jesus that had been completed by the Roman Catholic Church just months before the storm.⁶ Yet the statue still stands today, while the Honduran Bible Society office and many church buildings were destroyed. Certainly some drug dealers and corrupt officials died or lost their homes, but so did law-abiding Christians.⁷ Even so, many Hondurans continue unwaveringly to interpret Mitch in terms that depict God as a vengeful judge lashing out in anger and sending Mitch as a punishment for their sins.

It would be a mistake, however, to think that the magnitude of the disaster suddenly led Hondurans to view God as an angry, accusing figure. Rather, many saw Mitch as a punishment sent by God because they *commonly* interpret sickness, the loss of a job, and other setbacks as interventions by a vengeful God. Although there is talk of God’s love, many live as if God’s love is conditional. God rewards those who live morally and fulfill religious obligations, and God punishes those who do not. It must be granted that these general statements do not apply equally to everyone. On the other hand, it certainly is a common, if not the most common, view

⁴ The Honduran government reported a nationwide toll of 5,657 dead, 8,058 missing, 12,272 injured, and 1.4 million homeless according to *USA Today* on 8 December 1998 (<http://www.usatoday.com/weather/news/1998/wsuspend.htm>).

⁵ The information in this paragraph is based on what I (Baker) heard in conversation with people after Mitch, when I was still living in Honduras, and on interviews with both Catholic and evangelical believers in Flor del Campo in June and July 2000.

⁶ In Latin America, the term “evangelical” is used more commonly than “protestant” to refer to non-Catholic Christians. For this reason, and because the number of mainline protestants in Honduras is very small, we will employ the term “evangelical” throughout this paper.

⁷ This fact is, of course, obvious to the Hondurans who see Mitch as a punishment sent by God. Many of them suffered great personal loss. For instance, “Luis” (fictitious name), a Flor del Campo resident who lost his business to Mitch, still describes the hurricane as a punishment aimed at the statue of Jesus and at those who practice a mix of popular religiosity and witchcraft.

of God held by Hondurans.⁸

C. Amor Fe y Vida Church

People from one church in Flor del Campo would acknowledge that what I have just described matches the way they used to think about God. They would also tell you, however, that they now know and experience a God distinctly different from the vindictive judge portrayed above.

In 1991, a few leaders in one of the evangelical churches in Flor del Campo came into conflict with the pastor of the church. They wanted to start using church funds to help the needy--both within the congregation and in the neighborhood. Like the other evangelical churches in Flor del Campo, their church practiced an individualistic-spiritualized version of Christianity that was basically indifferent to issues of justice and to the physical needs of their impoverished neighborhood.⁹ This group of four or five church leaders, however, had come to see that the Bible in fact has much to say about justice and concern for the poor, but the pastor was not sympathetic. He called them “communists,” and eventually they left the church. About 30 people left with them, as much for relational reasons as for theological convictions, to start Amor Fe y Vida Church in 1992.¹⁰

The leaders wanted all the people in the new church to embrace the concept of a holistic gospel, and they asked me to come and persuade the people of the church to do so. I was reluctant simply to tell them how they ought to be thinking. Instead, I offered to give a workshop over two weekends on how to study the Bible, intending to give them better tools with which they could discover this holistic gospel themselves. During that workshop, people repeatedly asked questions about the legalism of the evangelical churches in Flor del Campo. Concern and interest were so high that I returned a number of additional weekends to study Galatians with the group. Through reflecting carefully on Galatians, the members of Amor Fe y Vida Church were moved to seek to exchange an overly individualistic-spiritualized gospel for a more holistic one, and also to exchange their legalistic version of Christianity, with its angry, accusing enforcer-God, for an ethics of freedom that takes Christian behavior equally seriously, but that practices it as a response to a gracious and loving God revealed through Jesus Christ. They would admit that this theological transformation is still a work in progress, but it is one they undertake with great commitment and hope. I have had the privilege of learning with them through studying the Bible together as a group and through interacting with them in their

⁸ The concept of God described in this paragraph is based upon my reading, ethnographic research, and ten years of field experience in Honduras. For concrete examples and analysis see, Mark D. Baker, *Religious No More: Building Communities of Grace and Freedom* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999) 17-33, 40-48; Stanley Slade, “Popular Spirituality as an Oppressive Reality,” *New Face of the Church in Latin America* (ed. Guillermo Cook; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1994) 135-149.

⁹ For a discussion of these phenomena in the wider Latin American context and for examples of how this form of the gospel is articulated and lived out in Flor del Campo, see Mark D. Baker, *Evangelical Churches in a Tegucigalpa Barrio, Do They Fit the Escapist and Legalistic Stereotype?: An Ethnographic Investigation*, Duke–University of North Carolina Program in Latin American Studies Working Paper Series, no. 16 (February, 1995)

¹⁰ For a more detailed description of their history, see Baker, *Religious No More*, 49-55, 153-159.

D. Why These Texts, in This Place, with These People?

The Flor del Campo neighborhood, Hurricane Mitch, a concept of a vindictive, punishing God, and a small church seeking to row against the current form the context of this study. The stage is set, but it is fair to ask why we chose to study texts from Romans about God's righteousness.

It should be made clear from the outset that both of the authors are sympathetic to and supportive of the course Amor Fe y Vida Church has taken. Because I had been living in Honduras during Hurricane Mitch and its immediate aftermath, Ross and I knew that some in Amor Fe y Vida Church had been attempting to understand the hurricane as something other than a punishment sent by God, but we did not know their current thinking about this problem. In part, then, this project was seen as an investigation of--and a possible contribution to--their ongoing reflections about Mitch. We did not, however, go into the project thinking that these texts, by themselves, could answer the question: "Why all the death and destruction?" In fact, we do not even maintain that these are the most important texts for addressing this question.

We have three principal reasons for choosing these texts: First, we are interested as scholars and believers in the question of how to interpret "God's righteousness" in Romans, and we hoped to learn more through listening carefully to readings of Romans by believers from a sociolinguistic context quite different from our own.¹² Second, we do believe that one's interpretation of "God's righteousness" is an important component in one's response to the problem of theodicy generally, and therefore to this hurricane specifically. Third, how one interprets "God's righteousness" in Romans has tremendous ramifications for one's understanding of the shape of the Christian life. Consequently, we hoped that we would contribute to the ongoing quest of Amor Fe y Vida to embrace a more holistic gospel. At the same time, we honestly considered it just as likely that they would contribute significantly to our own understanding of what it means to embody the gospel message in a community of faith.

In preparation for my discussing Romans with people in Flor del Campo Ross and I carried on extensive conversations both in person and via e-mail concerning how to read Romans in light of some important works of biblical scholarship on the "righteousness of God" in Paul's thought. Together we came to believe that in Romans, Paul's phrase, "the righteousness of God," must be understood primarily in relational, rather than forensic terms, as expressing God's faithfulness to rescue and redeem God's covenant people--a people now understood by Paul to embrace Gentiles together with Jews.¹³ Next, I sent Ross a copy of the fruit of our interaction:

¹¹ I left Honduras in the summer of 1992, but I lived there again for two and a half years during the period 1996-1998. I have visited annually when not living there.

¹² Our interpretation of Paul's phrase, "God's righteousness," to mean, "God's covenant faithfulness, God's merciful commitment to deliver God's people," is a fairly common understanding of the phrase within scholarship that has influenced, or been influenced by, the "New Perspective on Paul" (see n.13 below). This interpretation relies heavily on the uses of this phrase in Israel's scriptures and in Jewish writings of the Second Temple Period. Wagner argues for the importance of Isaiah's language of "the righteousness of God" for Paul's argument in Romans in *Heralds of the Good News: Paul and Isaiah "In Concert" in the Letter to the Romans* (NovTSup 101; Leiden: Brill, 2002).

¹³ This interpretation of "the righteousness of God" in Romans is based on our own close reading of

information about the texts I would share with people in Honduras. He gave further input before I translated them in to Spanish. In Honduras I did a trial run by going over the material with David Garcia, the director of the extension program of the Honduran Holiness Church's Bible Institute in Tegucigalpa. I benefitted greatly from David's questions, criticisms, and suggestions for improvement.

II. READING ROMANS IN HONDURAS

After this preparatory work I met with groups from four churches: La Mizpa, a Central American Mission Church (1 July 2000), Amor Fe y Vida Church (4-6 July 2000), a Roman Catholic Church (8 July 2000), and Tegucigalpa Mennonite Church (25 June 2000 and 2 July 2000).¹⁴ With each group, I first read Romans 3:19-26 and Romans 8 with the people and asked them to explain the meaning of "the righteousness of God" in these passages. I then explained our interpretation of the same texts, and finally I asked them to reread Romans in light of our interpretation and offer their reflections on our understanding of "God's righteousness."¹⁵ This article focuses on my conversations with the group from Amor Fe y Vida Church. For the purpose of comparison and contrast, however, I will occasionally bring in interpretations that

Romans, which in turn has been shaped in conversation with a number of important studies. These include: S. K. Williams, "The 'Righteousness of God' in Romans," *JBL* 99 (1980) 241-290; R. B. Hays, "Psalm 143 and the Logic of Romans 3," *JBL* 99 (1980) 107-115; *idem*, "Justification," *ABD* 3:1129-1133; J. D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998] 334-46; E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977) 491-492; N. A. Dahl, "The Doctrine of Justification: Its Social Function and Implications," *Studies in Paul* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1977) 95-120; E. Käsemann, "The Righteousness of God in Paul," *New Testament Questions of Today* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969) 168-182; *idem*, "Justification and Salvation History in the Epistle to the Romans," *Perspectives on Paul* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971) 60-78. This relational understanding of "God's righteousness" has a long history in modern scholarship; an important early statement of this view is Hermann Cremer, *Die Paulinische Rechtfertigungslehre im Zusammenhang ihrer geschichtlichen Voraussetzungen* (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1899).

¹⁴Tegucigalpa Mennonite Church is the only one of the four that is not located in Flor del Campo. The discussion with the group from Amor Fe y Vida Church lasted five hours over three evenings; conversations with the other groups were somewhat shorter. The discussions were tape-recorded, and I later translated and transcribed them. All quotations from participants in these conversations are taken from the transcriptions.

¹⁵The focus of this article is how the people of Amor Fe y Vida Church interpret "the justice of God" in Romans, not how we do. Yet, at the same time, the paper is the report of a conversation. Especially in the second and third parts of the discussion I did not just ask questions, but contributed to the conversation. In this sense we chose to follow an approach similar to that of Ernesto Cardenal. In *The Gospel in Solentiname*, he elicits the Nicaraguan *campesinos'* reflections on biblical texts, but he also contributes information and ideas based on his life experiences and formal theological training. He reports not just their ideas, but the conversation itself (Ernesto Cardenal, *The Gospel in Solentiname* [4 vols; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1976-1982]). Gerald O. West, a South African biblical scholar, similarly understands his role to be that of a dialog partner with readers in poor and marginalized communities (*The Academy of the Poor: Towards a Dialogical Reading of the Bible* [Interventions 2; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1999]).

emerged during my discussions with the other groups.¹⁶

A. “The Justice Of God” in Romans as Interpreted by the Members of Amor Fe y Vida

La Justicia de Dios

Is the “righteousness” of God the same thing as the “justice” of God? For some interpreters it may be, and for others the phrases may have different shades of meaning. This is not a question we can ask Hondurans as we read Romans, however. In English, we translate Greek *dik-* words both with “just” and its cognates, and with “righteous” and its cognates. But in Spanish Bibles we find only one root employed: *justificar, justicia, justo*, etc. Therefore throughout the rest of this paper we will speak of “the justice of God” in order to reflect more closely the discussion that went on in Spanish.

“The Justice of God” and Hurricane Mitch

Before reading Romans together, I asked each group, “How is the justice of God related to Hurricane Mitch?” The majority of the responses in three of the four groups reflected, to one degree or another, the theme of Mitch as a just punishment from God. However, not one of the dozen participants from Amor Fe y Vida Church answered in this way. A common theme in their written answers,¹⁷ and in the discussion that followed, was the fact that human actions, such as cutting down forests, building houses in inappropriate places, slash and burn practices, and irresponsible mining, had made Mitch much more destructive than it would have been otherwise. So, as one person wrote, “God allowed us to suffer the consequences of our inappropriate actions.” Another explained, “The relation is that God permits us to enter into self-evaluation and see that we are destroying ourselves. In that way the justice of God is manifested.”

“The Justice of God” in Romans 3:19-26

In relation to Romans 3:19-26 and the question, “How is the justice of God manifested?” we can see two general approaches in the answers of the participants from all the groups. One approach, which I will call “juristic,” envisions God both enforcing and complying with a certain standard of justice. So, for instance, Ines, a member of La Mizpa Church who lost her house and all her possessions to Mitch, stated, “We need to be cleaned because, since God is just, he needs everything to be clean--to be pure and in order.”¹⁸ Others described God as a judge who gives us what we deserve. In contrast, the second approach, which I will term “relational,” places God’s justice in the larger context of God’s loving and compassionate relationship with people. Ines

¹⁶ Although the members of Amor Fe y Vida gave us permission to use their real names, participants in the other groups were told that their identity would remain anonymous in order to increase their level of comfort in sharing ideas while a tape recorder was operating. We will use a fictitious name for a person in one of these groups where necessary to enable the reader to identify different comments made by the same person.

¹⁷ Because not all of the participants could read and write, almost all of the rest of my questions were answered orally. In a few questions, like this one, however, I wanted to gauge the breadth of thinking of the group, not just the opinions of the most vocal. So I asked those who could do so to write their answers down before all were invited to share their responses verbally.

¹⁸ Ines is a fictitious name of a woman from La Mizpa Church.

asserted, “God is just because he loves us and always gives us an opportunity.” Rather than seeing God as just because God punishes us as we deserve, she explained that God is just because God recognizes that we are unable to live without sin and therefore forgives us. Significantly, the juristic and relational perspectives were found together not only within a single church group, but also at times within the comments offered by one individual, as in the case of Ines.

All of the responses from the members of the Amor Fe y Vida Church, however, clearly lined up with the relational approach. For example, Bertilia Fuentes, a middle-aged woman who runs a shoemaking business from her home, stated, “God manifests his justice by not holding our sins against us and by graciously giving us salvation God is a just God, not a God who is focused on punishing us.” Juan Ernesto Hernández, a man about 19 years old and in his first year of university studies, observed, “One can have different concepts of God’s justice. Some understand it in terms of love, compassion, and mercy; others put the emphasis on God giving people what they deserve.” Astrid Rivera, a woman about 20 years old and in her last year of high school, added: “It is not just how one thinks about God’s justice, but how one thinks about justice in general.”¹⁹ Thus very early in the conversation, long before I had mentioned anything about the contrast between juristic and relational concepts of justice,²⁰ a few people from Amor Fe y Vida were already emphasizing that interpretations of these texts in Romans could differ considerably depending on the concept of “justice” employed.

Some preliminary analysis may be helpful at this point. What are the factors that help to explain these variant understandings of “God’s justice”? Though there is no simple answer to this question, a number of influences must be considered. First, with regard to the “juristic” interpretation, it is safe to say that a traditional protestant understanding of the justice of God and of justification--deeply influenced by a greco-roman “juristic” conception of justice--has been taught in most evangelical Bible institutes in Honduras by North American missionaries. This is still by far the most common view being presented by their Honduran students who are now teaching the courses on Romans. So, although the participants in these study groups have not themselves received formal theological instruction about the meaning of “the justice of God,” they have listened to preachers who have.²¹ Moreover, the common Honduran conception of God as a stern and distant judge described earlier would certainly favor the juristic interpretation of “God’s justice.” And, of course, the participants are all familiar with the type of justice dispensed by the Honduran judicial system, which operates within a greco-roman model. For all these reasons, it does not surprise us that many described the justice of God in terms of a judge intent on punishing wrongdoers.

What *is* surprising is that many described God’s justice so differently--in relational terms such as mercy, compassion, and deliverance--and that, in fact, everyone from Amor Fe y Vida

¹⁹ NB: The people from Amor Fe y Vida agreed together to allow us to use their real names in this paper.

²⁰ See below, Section B: “The Justice of God” as Covenant Faithfulness: Insights from Biblical Criticism.

²¹ Elsa Tamez makes the similar observation that the understanding of justification by faith that focuses on “liberation from guilt by the blood of Christ on the cross” pervades Latin America. “Justification by faith functions as a sort of code phrase, in which the disjuncture with our reality is evident: Forgiveness of sin is spoken of in an individual and generic sense, and reconciliation too is seen on an individual and abstract plane” (Elsa Tamez, *The Amnesty of Grace: Justification by Faith from a Latin American Perspective* [trans. Sharon Ringe; Nashville: Abingdon, 1993] 19-20).

did so. How can we explain this relational understanding of “the justice of God” by many of the Honduran believers? One contributing factor is that when Hondurans describe a person or an action as “just” (*justo*), they most commonly mean that the person or the action is “fair.”²² For instance, a person who says, “I have a just employer,” probably does not mean that her employer follows the legal code established by the Labor Department. Rather, she means that her employer treats her fairly. The noun “justice” is less frequently used as a synonym for “fairness,” however. Moreover, when talking about “justice” in relation to courts and judges, Hondurans tend to think in terms of complying with legal standards. Yet the concept of a “just person” does provide the semantic opening for a description of “God’s justice” that focuses on God’s doing what is expected in a relationship, and thus it may lead, by extension, to those definitions that emphasize God’s mercy.

In addition, it would seem that some gave the answers they did because they have *experienced* a God much different from the distant accusing figure that many Hondurans associate with God. As the discussion continued, those from Amor Fe y Vida frequently mentioned that at one time they had understood “the justice of God” to refer to God’s commitment to punish sin. In recent years, however, they had come to see things differently, and they no longer interpreted the phrase this way. It is noteworthy that they gave answers very much in line with the more relational concept of justice that I planned to present to them,²³ even though they had not done careful exegetical work with Old Testament texts or read scholarly essays on the topic. Before our final study together, I asked two of the church members, Mario and Arely Cantor, what might account for this. They simply stated, “Because of the image we have of God, we could not give answers that put an emphasis on punishment.” That is, they did not articulate a view of the justice of God different from that held by most of the people because they had received a new teaching from us on God’s justice; rather, they articulated a different perspective on God’s justice because their new understanding of God would not allow them to parrot an explanation of God’s justice that contradicted the character of the God they saw in the Bible and experienced in daily life.

“The Justice of God” in Romans 8

We next read Romans 8, and I asked, “What, if anything, does this passage have to do with the justice of God?” Juan Ernesto, referring to the first four verses, stated that we see a demonstration of God’s justice in that “God changed the ‘rules of the game’ so that we are not condemned, not under the law.” In relation to verses 31-34, David Suazo, an eighteen-year-old man who has just started at the university, observed, “God is here not in the role of accuser or judge, but of defense attorney.” Mario Cantor, who is the lay pastor of Amor Fe y Vida and with his family runs a shoemaking business out of their home, followed up on David’s statement by observing that if God is not the accuser in chapter eight, then perhaps it would be wrong to see God as the accuser in chapter three.

Juan Hernández, a middle-aged man who is a community organizer and educator and who has worked with various development agencies, related what he read in vs. 17 to the idea of

²² “Fair” and “just” are given as the two English translations of the word *justo* in *The Oxford Spanish Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994) 442.

²³ See below, Section B: “The Justice of God” as Covenant Faithfulness: Insights from Biblical Scholarship.

justification. He noted that since Paul talks of our present suffering with Christ, “justification implies a relation to how we live and what we do in the here and now.” Juan also believes we have a role in the redemption of creation in the sense that creation waits for the revealing of the children of God (Rom 8:19). This “revealing of the children of God” would include our displaying “an appropriate stance in relation to creation.” Mario agreed, “We are the cause of the suffering of creation and we have a role in its redemption. It is not just something we should be waiting around for, like in the films about the rapture.”

B. “The Justice of God” as Covenant Faithfulness: Insights from Biblical Scholarship

I have organized the report of my conversation with Amor Fe y Vida Church into units that imply that I first listened to their interpretation, then presented our interpretation (worked out in the context of North American and European biblical scholarship),²⁴ and finally asked them to respond to our interpretation. In a general sense, this is an accurate description of the course of our study together. But in reality, our conversation was much more fluid and interactive than this outline would suggest. As soon as I began to explain our perspective, the people of Amor Fe y Vida, through their questions and comments, started evaluating, interpreting, and at times arriving on their own to the place where I was headed.

In this part of the study, I first had us read biblical texts together that would elicit the recognition that Paul and his fellow Jews operated with a different concept of “justice” from the one that lies behind the Honduran judicial system. I began by having us read Psalm 145:7-9 together in order to note how the psalmist speaks of God’s justice in close connection with God’s grace and mercy. I then asked the participants to imagine themselves standing before a Honduran court, admitting that they were guilty, or unjust, but then also pleading not to go to prison. I asked them to complete the following sentence: “Honorable judge, I acknowledge my guilt, but I appeal to your _____! Please don’t send me to jail!” Without exception, they each filled the blank with the word “mercy.” Next I asked them what would happen if a person appealed to the judge’s “justice” rather than to his “mercy.” They laughed and said that such a person would be asking the judge for a prison sentence! At that point, we read Psalm 143 and saw that David says exactly what we had just acknowledged would make no sense in a Honduran court. David admits his guilt (vs. 2), while all the time appealing to God’s “justice” (vs. 1). They quickly concluded that David must be using the word “justice” differently from the way we would use it today in a Honduran court.

Once they had made this discovery, I went to the blackboard and listed a number of key differences between what I have chosen to call “juristic” and “relational” conceptions of justice, describing what it would mean for a person to be considered “just” in each one. For instance, I told them that, on the juristic side, justice is an external norm or criterion that is used to measure whether one is just or not. In contrast, the psalmist’s concept of justice is relational. One cannot be considered just apart from the question of how one stands in relationship to God and to others. People are considered just when they fulfill their obligations, responsibilities, and agreements with others. The contrasting terms, “juristic” and “relational,” are not intended to suggest that there is not a legal aspect to a relational understanding of justice. The question is rather one of the *basis* for this justice--the demands of an abstract set of legal principles, or the obligations of a concrete interpersonal relationship? In fact, one of the ways I helped people understand the difference between the two was asking them to contrast how a judge would operate depending on

²⁴ See note 13 above.

whether the society held more of a juristic or a relational concept of justice. Through the lens of the relational perspective, then, we observed a close relationship between “justice” and “faithfulness.”

Before I had even begun to talk about God in connection with this relational understanding of justice, Mario saw where all this was heading. He observed, “It seems that through history the relation between God and humans has been through covenants. So it is when we are unfaithful to these covenants that God considers us unjust. Nevertheless, God continues to be faithful to the covenants, and therefore God is just.”

Since Mario had introduced this theme, I led the group in unpacking his statement. Then, to see if others understood, I asked, “What will we evaluate to determine if God is just according to a relational conception of justice?” David replied, “God’s faithfulness to God’s covenants and promises.” In contrast, Juan stated that according to the juristic concept of justice, one would measure the justice of God according to “the form in which God applies the law,” by evaluating whether or not “God gives each person what he or she deserves.” David added, “We would evaluate God’s own actions according to the criteria of the laws.” In a group from another church, Luis made a similar observation, but recoiled from its implications for his view of God. He said,

I certainly have very often interpreted God’s justice according to the juristic perspective. Now I see that I was not correct to do this. This has led me to ask myself, “Why have I thought of the justice of God in this way? Who is going to impose norms of justice on God? God does not need to ask for norms or moral criteria.”

Before turning our attention back to Romans, we quickly looked at a number of additional Old Testament texts, including Isaiah 45:20-25, Isaiah 51:4-8, Psalm 40:9-11, and Psalm 98:1-3. Seeing how “justice” was used in conjunction with words like “salvation,” “faithfulness,” and “mercy” served to reinforce and expand their understanding of the relational concept of justice.

All of the groups responded positively to my interpretation of “the justice of God” as referring to God’s faithfulness to God’s covenants and promises. They demonstrated that they understood it, and they communicated in various ways that they found it helpful. A number of things probably contributed to their positive response. First, they all take the Bible quite seriously. Therefore, it was significant for them when they encountered texts in the Psalms and in Isaiah that describe justice in a way different from the juristic concept of justice with which they are familiar from the setting of the court-room. Second, although the Honduran state does, of course, have a juristic approach to justice, Hondurans in general do not hold their judicial system in high regard. In light of that fact, and because of the opportunity their use of “*justo*” affords for conceiving of a person being “just” in other than a juristic way, these Hondurans may have found it easier than people in some other sociolinguistic contexts to imagine that Paul understood justice in a way that differs markedly from the juristic concept. Third, in the case of those from Amor Fe y Vida, it is likely that they readily embraced this new perspective on the justice of God because it meshed well with the way they were already reading Romans. They did not receive it as a challenge or correction to their reading, but as something supportive, enriching, and clarifying. Even so, this particular way of thinking was new to them, and so I was eager to hear how it might affect the way they read these passages in Romans a second time.

C. Rereading the Texts with Amor Fe y Vida

I continued the conversation with the group from Amor Fe y Vida by rereading the two passages in Romans (3:19-26 and chap. 8) and asking them how understanding the justice of God in a relational sense--that is, as covenant faithfulness--might change, confirm, or enrich the way they had read it before. As already mentioned, in 1992, Amor Fe y Vida Church made an intentional break from the typical form of evangelicalism found in other churches in their neighborhood. Their eight-year struggle to become a different kind of church has entailed a good deal of theological reflection. They have sought to identify and to leave behind teachings that produce the legalistic and overly individualistic-spiritualized version of Christianity they faulted for leading to indifference to the needs of the community and for doing little to lessen people's fear of a distant and accusing God. We might say that they are attempting to weed out theological perspectives they consider a barrier to people experiencing true *shalom* through a holistic gospel, while seeking to plant in place of the weeds theological perspectives that are life-giving and that promote the embodiment of a holistic gospel in their particular community of faith.

This process was evident as they reread Romans. They continually talked about the way they would have read Romans some years ago--interpreting the justice of God through the lens of a juristic concept of justice--and they contrasted that old reading with the new possibility of looking at Romans through the lens of justice as covenant faithfulness. Arely Cantor, a woman in her early twenties, observed that from the juristic perspective one would say that "God sent his Son to take our place and pay the penalty we should pay; therefore God is able to forgive and still remain in line with the criteria of justice." She went on to say that from a relational perspective of justice one would say that "God is just because God keeps his promise, his covenant, to bring salvation through Israel to the nations."

The members of Amor Fe y Vida displayed particular interest in discussing the related issue of justification. Licethe Flores, a woman about 20 years old, stated that whereas evangelicals typically think of justification in an individualistic way--as a matter solely between God and an individual--if one thinks of being justified from the perspective of a relational concept of justice, more people are involved. Mario asked whether justification is instantaneous or gradual. The group agreed that from a juristic perspective it is seen as instantaneous. Mario then wondered whether a relational perspective of justice might allow them to understand justification as both instantaneous and a process. Juan answered, "I have the impression that God manifests himself to us in a gradual way. We are in a process of growing in and experiencing the grace of God. Not in the sense that we have to reach a certain point in the process in order to be saved, but that we are in the process of more deeply experiencing God's love." Mario responded,

The juristic concept of justification in our context ends up having a certain magical character to it; in contrast, the relational concept is real. The relationship between God and the human and the relationship between the human and other humans is real and permanent. Also, on the juristic side there is no cost [to us], but on the relational side there is a cost, implications.²⁵ God expects something from us when we are brought into

²⁵ When in their statements they mention "side," they are referring to the blackboard which we divided in half, listing on one side characteristics of a juristic understanding of justice and on the other side characteristics of a relational understanding of justice.

relationship with others of the people of God.

Arely added, “We are speaking of a commitment. If I decide to enter this community of faith, there are consequences and implications to joining the community.” Juan agreed, “On the juristic side we do not have anything to do, on this other side we have to make decisions in freedom.” Although everyone appeared to agree with this, they also observed that churches that present justification in the traditional way do in fact make many demands and do expect people’s behavior to change. As Tina Raudales said, “many are living in fear of sinning and losing their salvation.” Juan acknowledged that this is true, but observed, “There may be a program of religious rules, such as having to go to church every night, but it does not flow from the experience of God in justification. Rather it is an individualistic effort to measure up to religious standards.”

The group stated that one of the central teachings of Romans 8 is that God is for us and that nothing can separate us from God’s love. They observed that there is little relation between the justice of God and these verses if one interprets the justice of God through the lens of a juristic concept of justice, but that there is a strong connection when the justice of God is interpreted as covenant faithfulness. Following up on the discussion of an individualistic versus a more corporate understanding of being justified, Arely pointed out that in Romans 8:31-39 Paul writes in the plural: “It says nothing can separate *us* [from God’s love]. It is about community.”

In observations like these, the group both appropriated ideas I had shared earlier and also made fresh connections and reached new conclusions on their own. In fact, they contributed to our conversation about the justice of God insights that I had not anticipated. This is especially evident in their emphasis on human responsibility for caring for creation as an implication of Paul’s discussion of the redemption of creation in Romans 8. For instance, Juan stated, “As the children of God are made manifest [vs. 19], they will work to save the creation. So, as God keeps his promise to bring salvation to humans, God is also bringing salvation to creation.”²⁶

At the end of our time together, I returned to the question of the justice of God and Hurricane Mitch. I asked the group from Amor Fe y Vida how this conversation had contributed to their thinking about this problem. Mario spoke first, saying,

From this study it is clear that Hurricane Mitch was not a punishment from God, although that is the common interpretation among many people here--that God sent Mitch to bring justice by giving people the punishment they deserved. But I see in this reading of Romans that God promised to restore rather than destroy, to give life rather than to kill. So the common view does not match up with God’s intentions. How does it help us? It liberates us from fear, from fear of the idea that God will punish for whatever thing we might do. It allows us to live more in freedom and have an internal sense of peace.

Astrid asked, “But wasn’t there judgment involved in Mitch? Like we said before, people suffered as a consequence of human sin.” Bertilia responded, “We do not have a vengeful God. As Mario said, we do not need to be terrified of God. The negative destruction of Mitch, as we

²⁶ The Spanish translation Juan read from (*Reina-Valera*), literally translated to English, is: “the manifestation of the children of God” (*la manifestación de los hijos de Dios*). I have therefore used his term, “manifest,” in my translation of his statement, rather than the NRSV’s “revealing.”

said before, was much worse because of our actions. It could be even that the hurricane itself, its size, is related to our lack of concern for the environment and the atmosphere.” Francisco Vargas, a middle-aged man with an activist spirit, interjected, “But there still would have been a hurricane.” I said, “Right, but is there something in Romans that might help us with that issue?” Francisco replied, “We read here that something is amiss with the creation itself. It is suffering birth pains and awaiting liberation. This implies that things in creation are not as God originally intended.” Arely concluded,

Thinking about this in relation to the corporate sense of the relational concept of justice, we see that the actions of some humans have affected a whole generation of Hondurans, and we are suffering the consequences of these actions. But, as a Christian community of faith, we have the hope of returning to what God originally desired.

PART TWO

LESSONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR MISSIONARIES

We have chosen to use the bulk of this article in description. Our hope is that readers will interact with the case study we have presented and learn from it even in ways beyond which we might imagine. Therefore, this final section is not meant as a full analysis, but as a catalyst for further reflection. We will briefly reflect on some of the implications we see for missionaries--and by extension, for those who teach missionaries, whether professors of mission or of Bible in Christian colleges and seminaries.

Be Intentional in Listening – Because we anticipated sharing the results of this study with a group of Bible scholars who were specifically interested in the Hondurans’ interpretation of these texts, we carefully designed the Bible studies to include spaces in which we would only listen. Mark had previously led numerous Bible studies of an interactive character in Honduras. He had listened and learned from Hondurans in the past. To have listening as the central focus, however, gave a different character to this listening through which we received more than the listening done in a more traditional Bible study discussion.

Have an Attitude of Expectation - Closely related to listening intentionally is an expectation that the Holy Spirit will use the conversation about the biblical text to provide new insights, not just for the people at the grassroots, but also the missionary and Bible scholar. We expected to learn from our Honduran conversation partners. That attitude led us to listen and converse differently than we would have without that expectation. In retrospect we observe that we should have had greater expectations for how the Hondurans themselves would benefit from the conversation. We were aware of their context and their experience of Hurricane Mitch. We chose these texts in part because of ways we thought they would be helpful to the Hondurans. But their reflections and conclusions went beyond what we had imagined. In part this was because of the next point..

Recognize that the context and culture of the people will help them to see and understand things in the biblical text that the missionary misses. Just as we recognize that every culture will have points of contact with the gospel and points in conflict with the gospel, we should expect that

each cultural group involved in the conversation will both be helped and hindered by their context and culture as they interpret the Bible. Some of the ways we observed the Hondurans' context aiding their reading of the biblical text include the following. First, their insight that the hurricane's destructive power had been exacerbated by a long prior history of environmental abuses in Honduras helped the members of Amor Fe y Vida draw from Paul's discussion in Romans 8 of creation's current suffering and promised redemption concrete implications for the way we should treat the environment in the here and now. In addition, the sociolinguistic context of the believers in Honduras appeared to exert a significant influence on the interpretations they offered of "the justice of God." The tendency of these Hondurans to conceive of God's "justice" (*justicia*) primarily in relational, rather than strictly in legal, terms may well have been facilitated by the way Hondurans commonly use the related adjective "just" (*justo*) to describe a person who meets his or her social obligations. In particular, the ongoing struggle of Amor Fe y Vida to embody what they believe to be a more holistic, community-oriented gospel provided them with a deep sensitivity to the "horizontal" aspects of justification (i.e., its implications for human relationships).

Recognize that a broad spectrum of Christians are capable of analyzing and interpreting the text, not just those with formal training. The richness of our conversations with each other and with the Hondurans displays what a loss it would have been if we had simply carried out the one-way approach of Ross instructing Mark in an interpretation and Mark then informing the Hondurans how to understand these texts. To say this, however, is not to embrace a one-way approach in the opposite direction.

Be Intentional in Contributing to the Conversation – All of the groups of Hondurans that participated enthusiastically affirmed that they found the activity helpful and that they appreciated Ross's input as communicated by Mark. Just like the context of those at the grassroots, the missionary's context, training and access to biblical scholarship (through written works if not through personal conversation) provide both helps and hindrances in interpreting the text. It would be a loss to only listen and not bring these assets to the conversation. The challenge is to share insights that are valuable and relevant and to do so in a way that contributes to the conversation rather than ends the conversation.

Always Have Context as Part of the Conversation – It would be wrong to view the missionary's interaction with the local people as the only part of the conversation where contextualization plays a significant role. Rather, the missionary should be engaging the Bible and biblical commentaries with questions of context (the missionary's own, as well as the people's) before opening the text at the grassroots. So, for instance, in our case, the post-Mitch context of Tegucigalpa and the context of North American biblical scholarship was part of our discussion long before Mark actually sat down for conversation in Flor del Campo.

This is an Ongoing Process– The previous paragraph could imply that this type of collaborative reading of the Bible is a linear process that begins with the missionary engaging biblical scholarship in relation to a particular contextual issue, and then proceeds to a discussion with people in that context. In reality, however, Bible studies and conversations Mark had previously

had in Flor del Campo²⁷ influenced the discussion between him and Ross that preceded this study of Romans in Flor del Campo. And, in turn, this conversation about Romans has contributed to further conversation Mark has had in Flor del Campo about other texts and issues, just as it has influenced the authors' ongoing discussions of other texts and contexts.²⁸

The Missionary Has the Responsibility (and Possibility!) of Communicating Back to Biblical Scholars and Sending Churches—If Bible scholars, professors, pastors, and church members in the North are to benefit from this conversation, the missionary must seek opportunities to communicate insights of both content and method gained from the conversation in his or her mission setting. This too is, of course, a contextual activity. What we have shared with a group of biblical scholars differs significantly from conversations we have had about this material in church and classroom settings in North America.²⁹

CONCLUSION

In addition to the positive things we have already stated or displayed, we would like to highlight a further advantage to the approach what we have attempted to model. We believe that the Bible is a living and powerful text that can be used by the Holy Spirit to challenge and shape Christians as they read it together today. It is crucial that pastors, missionaries, and teachers empower readers to enter into the scriptural narrative themselves, seeking to understand it and allowing the Spirit to use it to shape and guide their imaginations as they relate the scriptures to their present context. Unfortunately, a one-way model of biblical interpretation that does not invite conversation, but rather presents people a text whose meaning has already been determined, discourages people from engaging the text and hearing it speak to their context. Although the conversational model we present does not guarantee openness to, much less obedience to, the Spirit of God, it does create more space for God to use the biblical text to shape and challenge all parties to the conversation.

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²⁷ See section I.C. above.

²⁸ For example, the experience of reading the Bible in conversation with Mark and with the members of Amor Fe y Vida significantly shaped Ross's teaching of a seminary-level course on contextual interpretation of the Bible.

²⁹ See Part II of the paper we gave at the Society of Biblical Literature for our perception of implications of this conversation for the Bible scholars in that setting. Now published in *Navigating Romans Through Cultures* (ed. K. K. Yeoo; Romans Through History and Cultures, Vol. 4), 2004.

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