

# Bridging the Great Divide in Evangelical Churches

One of the dismaying trends within evangelical Protestantism in America is the growing divide between those evangelicals who emphasize the church's responsibility to proclaim a gospel of individual conversion and those who emphasize the church's responsibility to advocate for social justice.

It is a trend that [featured prominently](#) at this summer's synod of the Christian Reformed Church (CRC).

CRC pastor Andrew Beunk characterized it as a divide between "a strong accent on gospel-centered, confessionally rooted proclamation, and on the other side an accent on justice and mercy."

He asserted, "Everyone in this room wants these things held together all the time. We all want that. And yet we feel like these things are getting accented in ways that at times make us uncomfortable."

One of the frustrations expressed at Synod 2017 was that calls for the church to serve the poor and the oppressed and to advocate for justice are too often expressed without reference to the church's gospel mission.

As Craig Hoekema, lead pastor at Calvin Christian Reformed Church in Ontario, put it, referring to a specific recommendation under discussion, "It's not because we don't like justice; it's not because we don't think the church is called to do justice. It's because in this recommendation, for example, there's very little language that connects these activities to the unique mission of the church, which is to make disciples."

Hoekema went on, "I think I speak for many of us when I say that what we'd like to hear more of in a recommendation like this is how we engage in these kinds of

efforts in order to bear witness to the kingdom of God so that others may come to faith in Jesus Christ.”

“That would more clearly connect this call to justice with what is the unique mission of the church,” he added, “and why this is a recommendation, not just for a secular social agency, but for an ecclesiastical body.”

Hoekema is exactly right.

The gospel calls us to seek first the kingdom and its justice/righteousness (Matthew 6:33), and Jesus proclaimed the blessings of the kingdom for those who are persecuted either for the sake of justice/righteousness or for the sake of Jesus (Matthew 5:10-11).

Any theology that fails to hold these together is a false theology. A church can hardly claim to be faithful to the confessions when it does not advocate for the sort of justice taught in those same confessions, nor can a church claim to stand for the justice of the kingdom without proclaiming the gospel that is summarized in those confessions.

In fact, the Reformed tradition once emphasized both sides of this tension. Calvin hazarded his career on his determination to preserve the integrity of the mission of the church, and yet for Calvin it was precisely this mission that called the church to stand with the poor and advocate for justice.

I explore Calvin’s political theology in my recent book, “Calvin’s Political Theology and the Public Engagement of the Church: Christ’s Two Kingdoms,” as well as in work I have done on [Calvin’s theology of poor relief](#).

I recently offered a brief presentation on Calvin’s theology of social justice at New City Fellowship in Grand Rapids, Michigan, which can be viewed [here](#).

The Christian Reformed Church, like other denominations, desperately needs to have a substantive conversation about a theology of social justice in light of the mission of the church.

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