



Book Review of [The Just Church](#) by Jim Martin

LMPG Network Resources

By Hannah Garland

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At the beginning of his book, *The Just Church*, Martin makes the claim, “God’s people have always been his solution to the suffering of the world’s vulnerable” (xix). He argues that for churches to experience the presence of God and grow discipleship within their congregation, they must intentionally pour themselves outward into the hurting world. Just like the Israelites in Isaiah 1, believers can become so concerned with our “spirituality” that we forget God’s true calling on our lives to “cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow’s cause” (Is 1:16-17, ESV). We have disconnected the *form* of worship with its intended *function* (74). We mistakenly “leave the secular and enter the sacred...[we] shake off all the concerns of the world and simply pursue God—a God who, for some reason, remains elusive to us” (77, Is 58). However, God is beckoning us to turn outward.

In *The Just Church*, Martin ([VP of Spiritual Formation for IJM](#)) challenges believers to dive into the justice-loving heart of Jesus. His book is divided into two main sections: Part I, “Justice, Discipleship, and the Failure Point of Faith,” explores God’s call on believers to be engaged in justice. Martin discusses the necessity of failure points in our faith, the nature of faith, and God’s designed role for the local church. In Part II, “The Justice Journey,” Martin lays out a basic framework for churches to begin engaging in justice ministry, as well as examples on

how churches have done this in the past. Overall, Martin's book is a much needed, practical resource for churches seeking to align their hearts and actions with our justice-loving God.

### **Part I: Justice, Discipleship, and the Failure Point of Faith**

Early on in his marriage, Martin experienced an unusually busy and stressful season—he and his wife were building a house, and he had been passed over for a desired ministry position. Finally, he reached his tipping point when a series of trivial delays prevented the house from being finished. As he shared his frustration, well-meaning friends would often share James 1:2-4 with him:

My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete lacking in nothing (ESV).

This is a powerful passage—that “in the midst of significant life frustrations...we should learn to see these challenges as opportunities...we will find in them the surprising presence of God bringing us to maturity” (17). Despite meditation on this verse, Martin remained uncomforted; however, one day it hit him— “the people James was writing to were living a drastically different kind of life than I was. Their lives were full of drastically different challenges than my own. They had real problems” (18).

Somehow, amid the early church's extreme trials, God was among them. As Martin says, “Part of considering it all joy must have had to do with the tremendous privilege of seeing God come through in places, at times, and in ways where nothing short of miraculous intervention would have saved the day” (22). It is in these places of extreme trial and suffering that the Lord's presence can be felt so deeply. It is in these places, through trials that produce endurance, that our faith matures; this maturity leading to mission. Places of trouble— “the place where we have so identified with the suffering of our neighbors that we are suffering alongside them...the place where we are acutely aware that we ourselves need rescue”—grow our faith.

Are we, in our own lives, regularly confronted with faith-challenging trials? If not, why are we shocked by our weak faith? Just like muscles need to be exercised to grow stronger, our faith must be exercised to grow. Martin illustrates this through a story—several years ago, Martin and his son decided to start a muscle-building program. During the workouts, they worked their muscles to a breaking-point where they could no longer move, rested a day, then repeated the pattern. During the rest of the off-days, the muscles would grow. Though the first few weeks were miserable, their muscles grew and could hold increasing amounts of weight. Muscle failure and rest produced muscle growth.

Similarly, times of “faith failure” are necessary in our lives for sanctification. As churches begin to follow their calling to justice ministry in their community and in the world, they will witness extreme pain, suffering, and sin. The church enters this work together for support and encouragement (57). Mankind is utterly depraved and this will be experienced in a new way when uncovering injustice in the world. However, “at the end of [our] ability to explain and understand came an invitation in the thundering silence: an invitation to trust” (43). We recognize that God’s love for the oppressed is so much bigger than ours can ever be. We trust in God’s good sovereignty, even using the evil in the world for His good purposes. However, despite the things we believe and trust, in this work, our faith will inevitably have points of failure. It is through these times, however, that God grows the muscles of our faith and proves Himself over and over again. We must take the risk of being Christ’s hands and feet in a broken world. “If we are risk averse, we will be faith poor” (50). If we do not take these steps of faith, we are settling with a weaker, poorer version of faith.

## **Part II: The Justice Journey**

The second section of *The Just Church* begins with a discussion of the appropriate fuel for justice ministry, followed by an outline of the three steps of a church’s justice journey: *Encounter, Explore, and Engage*.

Having appropriate fuel for doing justice is vital. When faced with issues of injustice, it is common to go through a cycle of emotions—shock, sadness, anger, guilt, an urge to fix things immediately, frustration when it is not a quick-fix, and disengagement. As Martin puts it, “It

may be helpful to reflect on the fact that those who perpetrate violent injustice upon the widows, orphans, and aliens of our world have not jumped haphazardly into their roles” (102). There is a cost to doing this ministry; churches must understand that. It is hard work and requires preparation, but the eternal significance is so worth the cost.

Through the rest of the book, Martin lays the framework of how a church can practically begin to step into justice ministry. In the first step, *Encounter*, the goal for the church is “meeting God in an unjust world” (107). The church in the United States is overall well-educated; the Christian resources that exist are astounding. However, the problem comes when these materials become an end in themselves instead of fuel. Believers in the West can quickly become “educated beyond [their] level of obedience” (109). As we become complacent to the church’s mission, our gaze rotates inward. We first, “lose the ability to see the world as it really is,” and second, “lose the ability to hear the Scriptures in their entirety...We do not engage in the world beyond ourselves because we do not hear the call to do so from the Scriptures” (112-3). The first step of entering the work of justice is to intentionally seek to hear the Word of God and, thereby, see the world correctly. This is done through framing justice in the lens of the Bible to the whole church—from the pulpit, in small groups, and in conversation.

Secondly, the church should begin to explore how their body can engage in justice domestically and internationally through “discovering the intersection of talent, need, and call” (139). This step of involvement is all about research and discernment by a small group (Justice Task Force) within the church—researching the state of the community and discerning the best steps of involvement. These decisions can be made through discovering the talents within the church, the needs within and around the church, and the calling of God.

After learning about the injustices occurring in the world and community, there are several reactions the church could have—Martin illustrates these through his experience of learning to flip into the pool as a young boy. Despite the patient and thorough instruction of his uncle, Martin was scared to step off the diving board. At the beginning of justice ministry, it is easy to be paralyzed by fear; “what you have learned may remain an abstraction” (142). On the other hand, after Martin learned to forward flip, he wanted to do a backflip immediately. He impatiently listened to his uncle’s instruction, flipped too hard off the board, and landed flat on

his back. Some churches might become overzealous when jumping, leading to a lack of building appropriate partners, unintentionally duplicating the work of others, and coming across as proud. As this step continues, the small group in your church will prayerfully focus on several motivating attributes—humility, wisdom, love, and hope.

The last step is to *Engage*: “moving from fear to faith” (185). As the Justice Task Force and the church walk together into justice ministry, this engagement in risk “requires the management of fear. There is no way to take a risk without effectively dealing with fear” (185). As Martin illustrates, one can learn as much as they want to about skydiving, but there is a point where knowledge should turn to action and one must jump out of the plane. “At the convergence of talent, need, and call, you find the faith to say yes to God’s invitation and embrace the risks ahead” (192). We can step out in faith because God is always faithful to deliver.

## **Evaluation**

Through a faithful reading of the Bible, one can see that God’s heart is a heart for justice. Jesus came to the earth for those who knew their sickness, their insufficiencies, and their brokenness. However, it is sometimes hard to articulate the importance of the church prioritizing justice ministry. In our churches, we can clearly see why it is important to be theologically sound in preaching and teaching, participate in collective worship, and give financially. However, sometimes the call to Biblical justice gets obscured and mistaken as social justice. In *The Just Church*, Martin does an excellent job linking how the church loves mercy, does justice, and walks humbly with God (Micah 6). The naval-gazers, broken families, and dying churches becoming so pervasive throughout the West are caused by sin as the church misses their mission. This mission is to live as ambassadors to the hurting world around them, loving God and loving those around them. How can this be done if we continue to look inwardly? This book, therefore, is not only good for churches who are actively seeking to engage in justice in their communities, but also for those who sense a growing, seemingly unexplainable stagnancy in their churches. As God works through His people to reach the

vulnerable, broken world around them, He grows believers, is present, strengthens churches, comforts the hurting, and brings many to Himself.