



# Global Faculty Initiative

**The Faculty Initiative  
seeks to promote the integration  
of Christian faith and academic disciplines  
by bringing theologians into conversation with scholars  
across the spectrum of faculties  
in research universities  
worldwide.**

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## LEADER GUIDE | JUSTICE MODULE 2 | JUSTICE IN SCRIPTURE

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### Session Objectives

1. To retrieve Wolterstorff's biblical understanding of the ubiquity of the Bible's teaching about justice in both the OT and NT
2. To reflect on a puzzle—if justice and rights are central to the biblical revelation, why are they so often neglected by the church and Christian scholars?
3. To consider how common misconceptions and mistranslations have suppressed attention to justice and rights in the church and Christian scholarship

### Reading

Wolterstorff: Theology Brief - ['Why the de-justicising of the bible?'](#) [6 minutes to read]

Wolterstorff: Theology Brief - ['A matter of translation'](#) [7 minutes to read]

Wolterstorff: Postscript - ['The biblical understanding of justice'](#) [8 minutes to read]

### Summary

[Nicholas Wolterstorff](#) claims that the Bible's central emphasis on justice can be observed across the entire biblical revelation. However, its significance has been obscured by, first, a common misunderstanding about the New Testament's teaching about love and, second, a common mistranslation of the New Testament's most explicit texts about justice. The New Testament's teaching that the greatest commandment is to love one's neighbour as oneself has often been misunderstood as somehow negating or discounting concerns for justice, a common theme in the Old Testament. Wolterstorff argues from the biblical texts themselves that the Bible's emphases on love and justice are not mutually exclusive but rather, mutually illuminating. He further contends that the New Testament's frequent teachings about justice have been regularly missed by English readers due to the common mistranslation of the Greek terms *dikaioi* and *dikaionê* in English Bibles as "righteous" and "righteousness". When these terms are properly translated—as "just" and "justice," respectively—the New Testament's explicit emphasis on matters of justice becomes readily apparent. This emphasis reinforces the ubiquity of justice in all genres of OT writings and compels a rethinking of justice and rights in the Gospels and Epistles as they reach across church history into the present.

## Questions

Q1: Wolterstorff maintains that themes of justice and rights span the scriptures, but very often they have been suppressed in Christian traditions. **Has your tradition, or your personal spiritual pilgrimage, been more or less alert to the Bible's concerns with justice and rights? In what ways?**

### Leader prompts:

- Suppressed: strong emphasis on personal faith without attention to systemic justice; few encounters in faith communities with rights issues of contemporary times; emphasis on ritual worship and not on outworkings of faith in the world; strong emphasis on propositional belief and less on protecting biblically-emphasized rights; church vulnerable to the temptations to abuse power.
- Alerted: like Wolterstorff, personally motivated by a specific historical and contemporary wrong; informed by Roman Catholic 'Compendium on the Social Doctrine of the Church'; active personally to protect the weak; part of church communities with a strong justice orientation.

Q2: In his [Postscript](#), Wolstertorff proposes an eight-point Biblical understanding of justice and rights:

1. The declaration that God is just and loves justice, and enjoins human beings to imitate God in doing and seeking justice.
2. Love for one's neighbor requires treating them justly and out of love.
3. Old Testament writers connect justice with what they call, in Hebrew, shalom.
4. Justice is an intrinsic component of what the NT writers call the kingdom of God.
5. When the biblical writers speak of justice and injustice, it is almost always social (systemic) justice.
6. Biblical writers emphasize the condition of the widows, the orphans, the sojourners, and the impoverished – call them the quartet of the vulnerable.
7. Biblically, securing justice in society is central to the God-given task of government.
8. To worship God is to render to God what is due God – to render to God what justice requires.
9. Wolterstorff emphasizes systemic justice, entire classes of vulnerable people, the kingdom of God, and earthly government.

**As Christians, what should be our priorities in pursuing systemic justice for the 'quartet of the vulnerable' and others, through our embeddedness in local, national and international governments?**

### Leader prompts:

government programs for homelessness; social welfare supports for poor ([economic justice and redistribution](#),

Sloman); stimulating markets for good jobs; affirming the languages of indigenous peoples or marginal social classes ([linguistic injustice](#), Bell); enacting economic and social laws to affirm dignity of women ([dignity, sexual violence and justice](#), High); protecting children in divorce settlements ([parental obligations](#), Parkinson); educating against racial and gender discrimination; treating refugees humanely; strengthening justice-oriented international organizations and institutions ([justice in transitional legal orders](#), Halliday); giving voice to the silenced ([linguistic injustice](#), Bell); pursuing justice through more transparent, empirically-informed, and fair government rules ([justice, market failures and government agency rule-making](#), Lee).

Q3: Wolterstorff argues that readers of English Bible translations have often been blinded to the New Testament's emphasis on justice due to the mistranslation of the Greek terms *dikaios* and *dikaiosunê* as 'righteous' and 'righteousness', rather than 'just' and 'justice', respectively. **Has this 'blinding' to justice in the Bible, and especially the New Testament (NT), suppressed the relevance of justice to your own research and scholarly practice?**

#### Leader prompts:

Blinding – a limited awareness that the NT calls me to a theological-ethical concern with rights and justice in ordinary university life or academic endeavours; NT interpretations seem less societal in orientation than personal or church-oriented, and thus little consideration is given to justice in the university or wider academic spheres of activity; apparent tension between work and faith that juxtaposes the seeming contradiction between law and love/mercy (for discussion on the intricate relationship between love/mercy and justice, see disciplinary briefs by philosopher [Osam Temple](#), professor of constitutional law [Nicholas Aroney](#) and biblical theologian [K.K. Yeo](#)).

Q4: The GFI Dialogue on Justice and Rights led to lively exchanges over the relationship between justice and love. Wolterstorff states that love has frequently been contrasted to justice, some wrongly arguing that love in the [NT supercedes justice in the OT](#). He contends both are salient in both the OT and NT and are 'mutually illuminating'. Yet, Osam Temple notes that there can be '[justice without love](#)'. Wolterstorff agrees that 'caring for others' is an expression of love and that '[caring for someone necessarily includes treating them justly](#).' **Does your reading of Scripture lead you to think primarily in terms of 'love and relationships' or 'justice and rights'? Who or what are the primary objects of 'care' in your own scholarship and scholarly life? How can they be treated justly, out of love?**

#### Leader prompts:

- Primary objects of care in our scholarly lives, locally, nationally, or world-wide: e.g., students, doctoral candidates, assistants, university workers, fellow scholars, university administrators; junior scholars; scholars from outside the academic centers of power; over-burdened and under-resourced scholars; historically marginalised scholars.

- Modes of ‘acting justly out of love’, and ‘caring’: encouragement, coaching, affirming excellences; going the extra mile in mentoring; advising on writing of papers, articles, books, reports; recognizing, overcoming personal prejudices.
- See philosopher and physicist [Claudia Vanney](#), biblical theologian [K.K. Yeo](#), and professor in international relations [Glanville’s](#) Disciplinary Briefs for discussions on acting justly in the academy.

## Other Questions

- How does accountability for justice and rights enter the academic world and your field?
- While Wolterstorff primarily cites prophetic declarations (e.g., Isaiah 61; 58:6-7; Luke 4:16-21; Matthew 12:17-20) and explicit commandments (e.g., Matthew 22:34-40, Mark 12: 28-34; Luke 10: 25-37; Deuteronomy 6:5; Leviticus 19:18), does the Bible’s remarkable composite of literary genres, including poetry, prose narrative, apocalyptic visions, letters, and more, amplify our understanding of justice?
- If you have primarily engaged Scripture in languages other than English, how have your Bible translations rendered passages such as Matthew 5:6, ‘Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice (dikaiousunên), for they shall be satisfied’? How has your tradition typically understood such passages?

## In Depth

Direct links to original writings by GFI scholars

### Theology

[Justice and Mercy](#) [White | Theology | Angelicum]

[On an alternative view of justice](#) [O’Donovan | Theology | U of Edinburgh]

[On justice as an attribute of God, on God’s justice extended to all nations](#) [Yeo | Theology | Garrett/Northwestern U]

[Parable of Good Samaritan and its relevance to disaster relief](#) [Davis | Architecture | Lund U]

[On God’s merciful justice](#) [Case | Human Flourishing | Harvard U]

[On socio-political transformation through the gospel; Using biblical principles to transform our world towards justice](#) [Yeo | Theology | Garrett/Northwestern U]

### Natural Sciences & Engineering

[Celebrating the natural world; On the Jubilee and the Sabbath and treating nature justly](#) [Hutchinson | Nuclear Science | MIT]

[On doing justice and showing mercy in disasters](#) [Davis | Architecture | Lund U]

## Social Sciences

[Babel, championing linguistic justice](#) [Bell | Sociolinguistics | Auckland U of Technology]

[Amos and international aid](#) [Day | International Relations | Australian National U]

## Humanities

[Building epistemic justice as good news for the oppressed](#) [Gomez | Human Sciences | U of Rosario]

[Linguistic injustice and derogated regional accents of Jesus and the disciples](#) [Bell | Sociolinguistics | Auckland U of Technology]

[“There is no love without justice but there can be justice without love”](#) [Temple | Philosophy | Bakke Graduate U]

[On biblical history written from the margins, by a people exiled or colonized with ‘searing self-critique . . . concerned with justice and oppression’](#) [Coffey | History | U of Leicester]

[Christians have something genuinely radical and subversive to contribute to debates on justice](#) [Watkin | French Studies | Monash U]

## Law

[Peace-making better than pursuing rights in family legal contexts](#) [Parkinson | Law | University of Queensland]

[On justice in judicial proceedings](#) [Wolterstorff | Philosophy and Theology | Yale]

[On the justice in transnational legal orders](#) [Halliday | Sociology | American Bar Foundation]

## Medicine and Public Health

[On healing the sick beyond the requirement of justice](#) [Peteet | Psychiatry | Harvard U]

[Justice as equality and equity in the context of healthcare, Justice as equal respect with regards to rights to the highest attainable standard of health, On the nature of health rights, Understanding health as wholeness and justice as respecting wholeness](#) [VanderWeele | Public Health | Harvard U]

[Love and justice in public health, the integral importance of relationships to health](#) [VanderWeele | Public Health | Harvard U]

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