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“...a road map guiding us from  
apathy to action.”

**RICHARD STEARNS**, president of  
World Vision US and author of *The Hole in  
Our Gospel*

# JUST CHURCH

Becoming a risk-taking, justice-seeking,  
disciple-making congregation

Jim Martin

FOREWORD BY GARY HAUGEN, FOUNDER OF INTERNATIONAL JUSTICE MISSION

# PRAISE FOR *The Just Church*

The American church doesn't primarily suffer from heresy or persecution but from inaction. Jim Martin's book is more than a call for Christians to practice Christianity; it's also a road map guiding us from apathy to action.

## **Richard Stearns**

President of World Vision US and author of *The Hole in Our Gospel*

Jim Martin understands that following Jesus requires us to move past mere good intentions and into the rewarding adventure of seeking justice and rescue for our neighbors in desperate need. *The Just Church* not only provides a convincing call to action, but it offers church communities the desperately needed handles to take next steps with clarity and conviction. This is a must-have resource for any who have concern for the oppressed but have felt powerless to act.

## **Mark Batterson**

Lead pastor and *New York Times* bestselling author

Justice is about discipleship, and what the world needs most is healthy people following Jesus. Jim Martin loves the local church, and *The Just Church* is all about equipping and empowering the church to follow where Jesus leads!

## **Christine Caine**

Founder of The A21 Campaign

If there is an organization with the authority to speak on the church's pursuit of justice, it is International Justice Mission. If there is a leader with the authority to speak as one who has been there, who has tested it in the local church and seen amazing advances, it is Jim Martin. I wholeheartedly recommend this book!

## **Ram Gidoomal**

Board chair, The Lausanne Movement

Jim Martin's profound book suggests that justice is not only about mission, but also about our own discipleship. Along the way there are many stories of both success and failure, all of which become valuable teaching points. The work of IJM around the world is brilliantly inspiring, and so is this book. *The Just Church* captures the heartbeat of a commitment to Christ and to his justice movement.

## **Matt Redman**

Worship leader and songwriter

This is the book I have been waiting for—a thoughtful and thought-provoking look at how discipleship and justice work are inextricably connected. If your heart has been broken by the news of slavery and abuse around the world, and if you have ever wondered how you can generate or participate in a sustained response to injustice, read this book! Nothing has stretched and grown my faith like my attempts to take God’s heart for justice seriously. This book is an incredibly inspiring resource for doing just that.

**Sara Groves**

Singer/songwriter

There is so much injustice in our world today, and organizations like International Justice Mission do a huge amount to fight it, particularly through the work they do to free children, women, and men from slavery; bring the perpetrators to justice; set the captives free; and care for them. I welcome this book as it seeks to help churches get more involved in this issue which is so close to God’s heart.

**Nicky Gumbel**

Vicar, Holy Trinity, Brompton, UK, and developer of the Alpha Course

Compassionate, realistic, down-to-earth, and very easy to read, *The Just Church* speaks powerfully into an issue that is a key part of the church’s integral biblical mission and a stark test of the church’s authenticity and integrity.

**Christopher J. H. Wright**

International director, Langham Partnership, and author of *The Mission of God* and *The Mission of God’s People*

*The Just Church* is as practical as it is transformative. It’s about how discipleship and “doing justice” are linked, and can literally change a congregation from the inside out. I can’t wait to get this book into the hands of the small groups in our church—and to the future pastors in our seminary.

**Dr. Stephen Hayner**

President, Columbia Theological Seminary

# THE JUST CHURCH

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disciple-making congregation

Jim Martin

A resource of The IJM  
Institute for Biblical Justice  
Learn more at [IJM.org](http://IJM.org)



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# Contents

Foreword ix

Introduction xv

## **Part 1: Justice, Discipleship, and the Failure Point of Faith**

CHAPTER 1: The Failure Point 3

CHAPTER 2: The Nature of Faith 13

CHAPTER 3: Finding Trouble in the Andes 33

CHAPTER 4: Recovering from Failure 53

CHAPTER 5: The Secret of Joy 71

CHAPTER 6: From Mailbox Baseball to Missional Risk 83

## **Part 2: The Justice Journey**

CHAPTER 7: Finding Better Fuel 99

CHAPTER 8: Encounter: Meeting the God of Justice in an Unjust World 107

CHAPTER 9: Explore: Discovering the Intersection of Talent, Need, and Call 139

CHAPTER 10: Engage: Moving from Fear to Faith 185

CHAPTER 11: Real Churches with Real Problems 211

The Final Word 233

Acknowledgments 235

## **Appendixes**

APPENDIX 1: Justice Materials for Further Study 237

APPENDIX 2: Justice-Related Scriptures 241

APPENDIX 3: A Sample Encounter Strategy 249

APPENDIX 4: IJM's Community Justice Assessment Tool 253

Notes 255



# Foreword

**IT'S AWKWARD** when you extend an invitation to friends and all you get is a pile of polite regrets. It's even worse when you realize that they declined not because they weren't interested in coming, but because you invited them so badly. And honestly, that's the way I feel when I recall my earliest attempts to invite fellow Christians into the biblical work of seeking justice in the world—and why I am so thrilled about this new book by my colleague Jim Martin.

In 1994 I had returned to the United States after leading the UN investigation of the Rwandan genocide and was working closely with a small group to launch the fledgling ministry that would become International Justice Mission. We were eager for our little team to be used by God to bring rescue and hope to people suffering violent abuse and oppression. But we were just as eager to invite fellow Christians to join us in God's powerful and passionate work of justice in the world—and to provide local churches with a practical vehicle for partnership in the work. We were excited to have our fellow believers join us in what we were discovering to be a struggle of divine calling, great difficulty, and deep joy. We longed for co-laborers in the prayers, the rescue, and the restoration. We sought partnership and companionship

in the transformation by God's grace of our own lives, as well as of those we sought to serve.

But we knew this would be an unfamiliar invitation. In most of the churches we connected with in the mid-1990s, justice was at best seen as an extra-credit option to the "legitimate" work of the church—a sort of semi-respectable hobby or extracurricular activity for people who happened to be interested in that sort of thing. At worst, justice was seen as a threatening distraction from the parts of God's call that "really" mattered. But in most cases, it was simply not *seen* at all.

But fresh winds were blowing through the church, and new openings were presented to extend this invitation. In fact, I vividly remember the first time I got to stand before a congregation and try out my new rally cry to justice ministry. Granted, it was an evening service, in August, in a church where the pastor owed one of my relatives a favor—but there I was with a full opportunity to share God's passion for justice from the Scriptures, to describe the urgent need in the world, and to extend Christ's exciting invitation to be his instruments of rescue and restoration in the most desperate places.

And . . . I bombed.

You could see it on everyone's faces as the service concluded and they rushed for the exits gasping for fresh air. I had drained all the oxygen out of the sanctuary with my depressing stories of horrible injustice and my soul-crushing, guilt-inducing tour through Scripture, proof-texting God's outrage about all this ugly oppression and abuse. As the last few ashen-faced believers trailed out of the church, I looked to my relatives, hoping to receive whatever implausible encouragement they might offer—but even they couldn't fake it. It was as if I had been in charge of inviting friends to a birthday party and had managed to make it sound like a seminar on aging.

Amidst all the accurate data about slavery, sex trafficking, torture, and abuse, and all the biblical teaching on God's beating heart for justice, I had left out the one truth that was larger than all of it: *hope!* Rather than inspire and empower these earnest Christ-followers to respond to God's holy calling, I'd left them in the paralysis of despair. I hadn't shared the joy and contentment of knowing that the struggle against injustice is *God's* struggle—and that we are simply called to do our little part and experience him as he equips his church to do the work. I hadn't shared the power of the invitation: God's call isn't to *feel bad about injustice*—but to *do justice!* Marvelously, God never gives us a mission without granting us the power to do it. And through the mission, he also promises to change us—to make us more like his Son.

Thankfully, this is the message of hope that now fills these pages—and today, the church is more than ready to receive it.

By his grace, over the past fifteen years God has ignited a movement of transformation in his church—a movement of passion and action on behalf of millions who are victims of injustice in our world. Today the church is awake and alive to God's call to justice, and we are praising him for this clear evidence of his Spirit and the many miracles of restoration and rescue he has done through and in the church.

And we sense he is just getting started.

So now—instead of the scramble for the exits prompted by my first rendering of the invitation—we have a very different and very good challenge. Today, more and more of God's people have joyfully accepted the invitation to justice ministry, and they are now looking for their place in the movement and for tangible ways to join Christ in the work. The challenge now is to provide these believers with a clear, Christ-centered pathway to concretely “seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow” (Isaiah 1:17).

This book is our answer to that challenge. It will equip you and your church to engage in God's struggle for justice in this world.

But at its heart, this is not just a book about joining the justice movement or about helping International Justice Mission—*it's about the way God transforms his church and molds us all into the likeness of his Son*. It's about discipleship. It's about the utterly unique way that God uses the struggle for justice to draw us closer to himself—through desperate dependence upon him and through extraordinary experiences of his power. Over and over again, we have seen churches find spiritual renewal and a depth of maturity in Christ like they have never experienced before through the transforming crucible of justice ministry.

My IJM colleagues and I have learned a lot over these last fifteen years of companionship with the body of Christ in the struggle for justice, and we are eager to share what God has been teaching us. The book you hold in your hands is an intensely practical guidebook to this uniquely fruitful path for spiritual growth. And in my view, you could not have a better guide than my friend Jim Martin.

Jim wants to see churches flourish in the work of justice because he loves justice; but more than that, Jim wants to see churches flourish in the work of justice because *Jim loves the church*. He takes genuine delight in the way God has chosen the church as the instrument through which he wants to carry out his redeeming work in the world—and his delight is contagious.

As a pastor, he *gets* the church—with all its beauty, strength, divine power, brokenness, flaws, and foibles. His voice is one of pastoral encouragement, because he has been there. Jim knows that God wants to ignite the church to light up the world with his justice—not because of the perfection of the church, but simply out of God's grace and eagerness to invite every person into his

redemptive work and missional purpose in the world. And what Jim most fundamentally knows is that everything in the church is *about God and our relationship with God*. For Jim, pursuing justice is about pursuing the God of justice, never some isolated external goal or accomplishment. His goal is to prepare your church for the work of justice—not through slick programming or human effort, but through a deep knowledge of God’s good love, a real communion with our Father who loves justice.

And this is a powerful thing—for each of us and for a world waiting in need.

If I could go back to the brothers and sisters I left sitting paralyzed in despair on that first Sunday evening service, *this* is the book I’d want to bring with me to share. I’d want to let them know that violent injustice is *real*; but more deeply and more wonderfully, I’d want them to know how eager our God is to equip them to do the work of justice and in the process to make us more like his Son.

Whether you’re taking your first step in this journey or seeking fuel after many years in the trenches of justice ministry, I’m so glad you’ve decided to read this book. By doing so, you are following Jesus into the deep waters of discipleship, where his power is made perfect in our weakness, where he brings his love to those in most desperate need, and where “your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday” (Isaiah 58:10).

Gary Haugen

President and CEO of International Justice Mission



# Introduction

IT SEEMED like a strange place for a pastor to be sitting. But there I sat, slightly wide-eyed, advancing slide after slide of images. In the room with me were more than sixty of the most significant officials in the region's public justice system: judges, prosecutors, social workers, medical doctors, and police. We'd all sat in rapt attention as the lab-coated medical professional walked us through the history of sexual abuse definitions dating all the way back to the Code of Hammurabi and arriving at the definition according to current legal code. She had now arrived at the more technical part of her presentation, during which she carefully explained the proper forensic medical examination procedure to discover, document, and collect physical evidence of sexual abuse. On her cue, I advanced through more than a hundred slides containing photographs at 10x magnification of actual exams with actual victims. The presenter pointed out in careful detail the telltale signs left behind by sexual abuse.

And as I sat, watching the difficult and graphic images play across the screen, I couldn't help but reflect on what was happening. Representatives from my church, The River Church Community in San Jose, California, had formed a partnership with a Peruvian organization called Paz y Esperanza—a group of Christian lawyers,

investigators, and psychologists working to combat an epidemic of sexual violence perpetrated against children in their region of Peru. We had initially entered the partnership looking for some small way to serve this courageous organization. But before long we were almost completely overwhelmed, not just by the scope of the problem, but by the vision these Peruvian brothers and sisters had for how the church could and should respond.

From the beginning of the relationship, we had been running just to keep up. But fast-forward a mere two years from our initial meeting with Paz y Esperanza, and there we sat in a room with the leaders of Huánuco, Peru's public justice system. The professional and knowledgeable presenter in the lab coat was Julie, a nurse-practitioner from our church. Also on our small team from The River were two mental-health professionals whose work focused on children at risk and whose clinical experience included dealing with sexual-abuse trauma. I was on the team as well, but since my skills and expertise were more pastoral, about all I was equipped to do at this particular meeting was run the slides.

What I found most remarkable during the meeting was the way we could almost feel the officials' commitment growing as we spoke. Key officials in the public justice system were adapting their definitions of what constitutes sexual abuse to align with internationally recognized standards. They were adopting the latest practices. The woefully out-of-date physical exam protocol was being replaced by an updated set of techniques that would gather the necessary evidence to offer survivors of sexual abuse the protections Peruvian law afforded them. Not only was the sexual abuse of children being discussed in public, but the officials attending the consultation were committing to real, practical, and effective change. Things were changing, and we weren't there just to watch them happen; we got to participate in the miracles. The battle, of course, continues to this day—as does the partnership between

The River and Paz y Esperanza. But this meeting, held on an otherwise normal Tuesday, represented a turning point.

The extent of the impact we witnessed in just five years astounded me. But equally shocking was the shift we witnessed over the next ten years in churches like The River. What we saw was that issues of injustice—such as the unprosecuted sexual abuse of children—were appearing on the radar screens of more and more churches. The church at large seemed to have moved from almost complete silence on the subject of justice to a remarkable verbosity—to the point where lately church and ministry literature and websites are seasoned with words like *justice*, *poverty*, *hunger*, *trafficking*, *slavery*, and *abolition*.

While it may be hard to pinpoint how these difficult issues have found their way into the church's sphere of attention, we should celebrate the arrival of the church to meet these important challenges. We may protest that the church (particularly the Protestant evangelical church) has shown up late, that other branches of the historical church have been there all along; we may express concern that the church is sometimes clumsy when it engages. But let us celebrate that a discernible movement of God's Spirit is afoot, capturing the attention of churches of all shapes and sizes, bending the imagination and energy of God's people back toward justice.

Last century, at the close of World War II, this same group of churches was struggling to come to grips with issues such as hunger, poverty, and homelessness. The 1940s and 1950s saw a dramatic increase in the number of Christian humanitarian organizations.<sup>1</sup> Many of these were formed by faithful followers of Jesus who in their World War II service had seen a kind of poverty and suffering previously unknown to them. The creation of these organizations was their faithful and courageous response to the needs they saw and an expression of their willingness to explore what the gospel of Jesus might have to say about such suffering. After more than fifty

years of God's patient work with his church, in my experience, it is difficult to find an evangelical church in the United States that does *not* have some sort of mercy program to address the issues of neighbors suffering for lack of basic needs.

Savvy readers will no doubt note that branches of the historical church have been involved in issues of justice for decades, centuries, even millennia. And they will also know that inner-city congregations of all types have long sounded the call for the church to engage injustice. These churches have articulated specific needs ranging from reforming public schools underserving the neediest students, to challenging unfair wages, to ending racial discrimination, to relieving hunger. Certainly these courageous pastors and churches are leaders to whom we are all indebted. This book and the movement it describes would not exist without them.

But for the purposes of this book, I will define the issue of justice more narrowly. The justice issues of concern in these pages are those involving the violent oppression of the most vulnerable in our world—most often in the Two-Thirds World.<sup>2</sup> I do not intend to imply that this need is greater than or should compete with or supplant local issues of justice more broadly defined. What I seek to call attention to is the remarkable (and welcome) shift currently taking place that has brought the suffering of victims of violence in the Two-Thirds World into sharp focus among resourced, comfortable evangelical churches elsewhere.

I have spent the last decade of ministry involved in the church's response to issues of violent oppression—first as a pastor of a North American church deeply involved in the fight against the unprosecuted sexual abuse of minors in a small community in Peru, and more recently as the vice president of church mobilization with International Justice Mission (IJM), a human rights organization whose staff are motivated by the Bible's call to seek justice. From this unique vantage point, I can faithfully

report that the growing justice movement is exciting and real. Though new and sometimes flawed, the church's engagement is as creative as it is courageous. Faithful followers of Jesus are taking significant risks to invest their time, talents, and resources in God's work of rescuing the oppressed, defending the orphan, and pleading for the widow (see Isaiah 1:17).

### **Shallow Motivations**

Because the suffering endured by victims of injustice in our world can be overwhelming to contemplate, affluent evangelicals the world over have often chosen (whether consciously or not) to isolate themselves from such horrors and insulate themselves from the charged emotions injustice-related suffering elicits. However, almost any exposure to the statistics—and particularly the stories of the many victims of violent oppression around the world—produces significant unrest for people of reasonably good heart. This turbulence of soul often leads to a burst of activity—a desperate search for some meaningful way to engage in the issues.

Add to this exposure the growing awareness in many churches that the Scriptures speak with remarkable clarity and regularity about the issue of injustice. Indeed, a simple reading of the Old Testament alone reveals this. With the understandable exception of idolatry, the Old Testament addresses injustice with greater frequency than any other issue.<sup>3</sup> There is a growing awareness that God has always been deeply concerned for those on the margins of society, those whose lack of power and voice make them extraordinarily vulnerable. Further, people of faith are seeing once again that from God's perspective, God's people have always been his solution to the suffering of the world's vulnerable.

Both the compelling nature of the need and the reality of God's call to engage are often reasons enough for action. I have been in

contact with hundreds of churches where newfound passion has propelled them several steps down the road to direct engagement in the battle against injustice. But the issues of violent oppression are by nature so very dark, complex, confusing, chaotic, and taboo that good intentions, passion, and even outrage often fuel involvement for a surprisingly short time. The inevitable loss of traction and feelings of disappointment and helplessness can and often do thwart the plans of the well-intentioned. As churches engage issues of oppression, they often find that the faith they bring is not rugged enough to survive the desperation they inevitably feel as they get close to the violence of injustice. The need to stay “in control,” the need to be “safe,” and the need for “success” deflate the passion and hope they felt so clearly at the outset. This often results in waning commitment or in a commitment to remain only on the surface of the issue.

There has already been much written on the shape and nature of the problem of injustice as it exists in today’s world. In these pages I will not add to the body of statistics that have been carefully gathered and disseminated by others.<sup>4</sup> My primary interest is to tell the story of how and why the church is engaging in the fight against injustice. The *how* of the story is inspiring and compelling, and it is my hope that it will propel many more churches to engage while offering helpful, concrete models for that engagement. The *why* of the church’s engagement may be surprising. While the statistics, the need, and the call of God are often the primary impetus for my friends around the world who are taking risks to engage, there is another benefit that few of us expected when we began this journey. What we’ve found is that the work of justice is some of the most fertile ground for discipleship that we’ve ever experienced. The places of violent oppression and abuse that may seem utterly God-forsaken are in fact the places where we have most deeply experienced the presence and power of God.

The call to the work of justice is therefore not God sending his church *out* to a place where God cannot be found. Rather, God is inviting us *into* the place where he is already at work. It is here, among the world's most vulnerable, that the Good News of God turns out to be very good indeed. In the work of justice, our good God is offering us what we so deeply desire in our churches. In the work of justice, God is beckoning us to experience his profound love for us and for the vulnerable of this world. The call to fight against injustice is therefore the call to intimacy with God and to deep discipleship.

That this is true should not be surprising. In the Scriptures, there is a repeated theme of faithful people seeking just such a palpable sense of God's presence. The Old Testament tells the repeated story of the Israelites desperately seeking intimacy with God only to become frustrated that he seems elusive. They continually engage in and refine their forms of worship by offering more and more lambs and goats and bulls. They engage in solemn assemblies and appointed festivals in an effort to seek God, but to their frustration, he is not found.

I perceive some of this struggle in my own church and in many of the churches my friends lead and attend. We continually tweak the mode of our worship in an effort to connect more deeply with God. Surely a new song, an ancient hymn, a new form of worship, or an old rite will give us that sense of connection we crave. Surely more liturgy, less liturgy, a better band, no band, or better preaching will win back for us that sense of God's presence in our midst. I think our willingness to examine our forms of worship is well-intentioned and often good, but it can produce a tendency to become entirely focused on these things to the exclusion of the clear commands of our Father. When left to fester, this disconnect becomes a sinful pattern that the Scriptures describe again and again.

This, in fact, is the context of the opening to the book of Isaiah:

What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices?  
 says the LORD;  
 I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams  
 and the fat of fed beasts;  
 I do not delight in the blood of bulls,  
 or of lambs, or of goats. . . .

Bringing offerings is futile;  
 incense is an abomination to me.  
 New moon and sabbath and calling of convocation—  
 I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity.  
 Your new moons and your appointed festivals  
 my soul hates;  
 they have become a burden to me,  
 I am weary of bearing them.  
 When you stretch out your hands,  
 I will hide my eyes from you;  
 even though you make many prayers,  
 I will not listen;  
 your hands are full of blood. . . .  
 Learn to do good;  
 seek justice,  
 rescue the oppressed,  
 defend the orphan,  
 plead for the widow.

ISAIAH 1:11, 13-15, 17

The Israelites' pietistic pursuit of God had become so disconnected—particularly from the needy and vulnerable around them—that God called it *sin*. He goes so far as to say they have

blood on their hands. The wonderful promise, however, is that for the church that is willing to learn to do good and seek justice, God is very willing to be found.

That's what this book is about. If there is a surprise contained in these chapters, it is this: Through the pursuit of justice we find our way to deep intimacy with a God who loves us and calls us into his work not only for the good of others, but for our own good as well. The work of justice, therefore, is as much about *discipleship* as it is about *mission*. You'll find this book divided into two roughly equal parts. Part 1 deals with the interrelatedness of discipleship and justice. In it we'll walk through the role that risk and even failure play in the strengthening of our faith. We'll talk about how the church of Jesus is hardwired for life-and-death struggle in our world and why opting in to that struggle is a great way to find the abundant life Jesus promises—a life full of belief, trust, joy, and deep discipleship. Part 2 lays out a practical approach to what it looks like to become a “just church.” In it you'll find a practical three-step process many churches have followed on their journey into justice ministry. You'll also find the stories of some of these churches themselves, along with a huge number of resources to get you on your way.

## **Two Prerequisites**

In my work with church members and church leaders over the last several years, I have found that one question is often on their minds as they begin to engage injustice. Leaders especially have wanted to know: As churches attempt to engage in the work of justice, what are the main reasons they fail?

It's an interesting and understandable question. Violent injustice is an environment far more complex and chaotic than most churches are accustomed to. Success can be hard to define, and

failure often seems inevitable. As with anything hard, it will require the very best of our hearts, souls, and minds. For us to engage in a healthy and sustainable way, it will require all of the common spiritual disciplines, including prayer, worship, stillness, study, and so on. But my answer to this specific question has been direct and simple. In my experience, there are two reasons that leaders, churches, and individuals either lose heart or fail to find meaningful engagement. The first is a lack of courage; the second is a lack of humility.

Courage is an essential virtue for any missional church. And as churches seek to step into the work of biblical justice, the need for courage becomes paramount. Mobilizing resources, people, and expertise to engage violent forces of injustice will require us to learn things we do not yet know, explore areas that are unfamiliar to us, and encounter a kind of darkness we would much rather ignore. Stepping through the unknown and into darkness requires a significant amount of courage. And a strange thing tends to happen to churches, leaders, and disciples as we get older. We become less and less comfortable with risk. In fact, early successes can ruin us for future risks. Early mold-breaking and courageous innovation all too often become memorialized as program and procedure. We end up preferring the known, the safe bet, the easy and clear ministry option.

If we are to engage violent injustice, courage will be required of us. Courage to learn what needs to be learned, to explore new frontiers of ministry, and especially to engage where we hear the Spirit of God calling us to engage, even—and perhaps supremely—when we feel that what we are being asked to do is not within our power. Churches that lack courage lack the necessary equipment to pursue justice.

Churches that lack humility, on the other hand, can become dangerous in the pursuit of justice. Experts in the field will be

among the first to say that a learning posture is essential to success—that a research-based, bridge-building approach to the complexity of engaging violent injustice is an absolute necessity. But learning and supporting are not postures the proud can easily take. All too often the church has shown up courageously but without humility. The results are almost always disastrous: broken relationships, ineffectiveness, frustration, wasted resources, and in many cases, harm done to those the church intended to help. Humility is essential to the kind of partnership that the work of justice requires: humility to listen to the voices of experts in the field, humility to listen especially when those voices of expertise issue from the church in the Two-Thirds World—humility to follow rather than lead.

For the church to be the church, we must embody both values simultaneously. When we lack courage, we almost inevitably settle for a deflated, anemic version of church. When we lack humility, we become incapable of partnership, unable to hear the voices of those we seek to serve, and we run the risk of dangerous overreach. But the good news, in my experience, is that it is hard to overestimate the power unleashed when both virtues are found in the same body. Regardless of size, tradition, or geography, the most successful churches are marked by both courage *and* humility. And they are finding that God’s call to engage violent injustice is a call to be the humble and courageous church—the just church. Nothing more and nothing less.

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Snap here with your smartphone or visit the link for a video introduction with Jim Martin as he invites you to join the mission of *The Just Church*.



[www.tyndal.es/JustChurchIntro](http://www.tyndal.es/JustChurchIntro)



PART 1

Justice, Discipleship,  
and the Failure Point of Faith



# The Failure Point

**ONE OF THE BEST** things about my job is getting to work with people like Blair. For more than three years, Blair directed the work of IJM in one of our South Asia offices. Much of what IJM knows about freeing slaves from the rice mills, brick kilns, farms, and rock quarries that become the scenes of their violent and prolonged captivity comes from the hard-won, operation-by-operation learning curve that Blair and his team laboriously climbed during his years in the field. By freeing hundreds of slaves through the patient, professional, and steady application of hard work, Blair now occupies some of the most rarefied air of the human rights community, along with legendary figures such as William Wilberforce and Harriet Tubman—though in his humility, he will almost certainly be embarrassed when he reads this comparison.

Blair is now based out of Washington, DC, where he serves as the regional director for all of IJM's offices in South Asia. I take advantage of having lunch with him about every chance I get. I enjoy these conversations for several reasons, not the least of which

is that Blair is one of the funniest people I know. His considerable intelligence and quick wit make him a lot of fun to share a meal with. But more than that, as a pastor, I find myself both mystified and fascinated by one question in particular: Where do people like Blair come from?

There is little mystery as to what produces a well-qualified and very capable lawyer, and Blair, a graduate of Wake Forest with a professional background in corporate law, is a classic example of the breed. But among lawyers, even good lawyers, the ability to manage and lead teams of people is a surprisingly rare gift. Blair has this gift. Beyond this, more perplexing to me are the questions that have to do with faith development and discipleship for someone like Blair. What produces people like Blair, who consistently make the kinds of Kingdom-oriented choices he has made and continue to take the kinds of risks he has taken? Certainly he could be working for some high-powered law firm. Both the prestige and the financial rewards would make possible for him a kind of life that is likely out of his reach now. So what is it that makes him different?

When you ask him, Blair talks about his journey as a collection of circumstances, surprises, and “accidents” that most of us would identify as familiar to our own experiences of life. He’s one of the many people who, when looking back over their past, often exclaim in surprise, “How in God’s name (literally) did I get here?”

But just the other day, Blair related a story that helped me understand how people like him are formed. It wasn’t a story of great discernment or courage. In fact, it was a story of failure—in particular, it was a poignant story of the failure of Blair’s faith. This story unlocks a bit of the mystery of how an ordinary disciple like Blair ends up doing extraordinary things in God’s name.

In his work supervising IJM’s offices in South Asia, Blair

travels frequently to work alongside our colleagues there. Several weeks ago, he was working with one of the offices that had carefully planned an operation on a local brick kiln where the owner held several individuals as slaves. A careful investigation had been conducted and six victims identified—three who had escaped and sought protection from the violent kiln owner, and three more who were still trapped inside. The victims' stories were documented in painstaking detail. Relevant sections of the law were cited to remove any question as to whether the victims were slaves fully deserving emancipation and restitution. Local authorities were approached and made aware of the situation. An agreement was reached and a date was set for an operation on the establishment to remove the victims from the kiln and to arrest the perpetrators. A veteran of at least fifty such operations, Blair was riding along to lend advice, help, and support to the team, some of whose members were new IJM staff.

The first part of the operation seemed to go well. As the local magistrate and IJM team entered the brick kiln, the victims were easily identified. And almost immediately, the magistrate questioned them in order to confirm their status as bonded labor slaves—a good sign. Over the years, Blair had learned to move this early stage of the operation along as quickly as possible. The longer it takes, the greater the chance the perpetrators can get word to their friends, sometimes resulting in crowds gathering around the facility. Crowds can quickly become mobs, and IJM staff have been beaten and threatened in the midst of such throngs in the past. But so far, no crowd gathered at the brick kiln.

The team encountered its first operational snag, however, when another government official arrived at the kiln. This official was known to Blair's team. On a previous operation, this man had been hostile both to IJM staff and the victims they sought to rescue. This same official aggressively inserted

himself into the questioning already underway, bogging down the entire process.

What followed was a confusing and bizarre turf battle as the two officials seemed to fight for control of the investigation. An inspection of the kiln was called for, as well as a demonstration of the brick-making process. The frightened victims complied with the officials' commands, while all along Blair and the IJM team watched more and more time go by.

Eventually the six victims were all removed to the office of the local magistrate, the government official with the authority and responsibility to determine the slaves' right to be set free. It is the magistrate who issues each victim's release certificate—a personal Emancipation Proclamation—declaring that person's legal freedom and right to restitution under a government program. This new freedom and release also signals the survivor's enrollment into IJM's two-year aftercare program.<sup>1</sup>

It was at the office of the magistrate that a crowd began to gather. Before the inquiry could be completed, almost fifty people howed up. Most appeared to be in league with the brick kiln owner. As is usually the case, there was a lot of yelling and some pushing. There are two things that happen in these situations. First there is an electric sense of insecurity and fear that radiates through the crowd, turning an already chaotic situation into a potentially explosive one. Second, there is an almost imperceptible pendulum that swings back and forth as the powerful brick kiln owners and their friends try to influence the magistrate's decision. The simple goal of such a mob is to create enough of a tug-of-war between rule of law and rule of power that the slave owner can convince the magistrate to disregard the clear standard of the law and order all the victims back into captivity.

Standing in the middle of the chaos, Blair experienced a flood of different feelings. As the veteran, he was there to instill

confidence in both the IJM employees and the government officials, all of whom had significantly less experience with these operations. As the veteran, it was his job to give clear direction to the IJM staff and determined advocacy on the victims' behalf to encourage the magistrate to do the right thing. And as the veteran—and one of just a few obviously foreign faces—Blair found himself the lightning rod for the crowd's anger. Blair was all too aware of the power of a crowd. The outcome of such operations is never secure, and often the scales of justice hang on the thinnest of threads.

As the futures of the six children and adults removed from the facility teetered back and forth, Blair felt he should pray. Clearly God cared about each of the victims. Clearly God was concerned about the safety of the staff under Blair's care. But in this moment, pushed to the limit as he was, Blair's faith reached a failure point: he found himself incapable of the faith such prayer would require. The faith muscle he needed so desperately was exhausted at the very instant he needed it most. In his paralysis, Blair sent an e-mail to his IJM colleagues in Washington, DC—an urgent call for prayer.

I remember this message being relayed to us during our daily staff prayer meeting. We prayed for the safety of Blair and his team. We prayed for the safety of those who had been removed from the kiln. We prayed that the magistrate would have the courage to do the right thing and release the slaves.

## **Muscle Failure**

As I grow older, one of the things I find hard to live with is the inevitable loss of physical strength. I am by no means feeble (yet), but for much of my life I've taken for granted my healthy, strong back and the ability it affords me to lift heavy things. As I work

my way through my forties, there is a perceptible loss of muscle mass that seems inversely proportional to the weight gain I've experienced during the same period. The result is a slow, seemingly inexorable settling of the body into middle age.

Recently I decided to try to begin counteracting this process. My ten-year-old son, Aidan, and I began a fitness program that includes both aerobic exercise and weight lifting. Doing this together has been a delight. At the beginning especially, there was painful stiffness and soreness, but the discomfort was soon overcome by the surprising joy of doing this crazy program together.

I was particularly interested in the weight lifting aspect of our program. The literature I'd read promised that while loss of muscle mass was inevitable, it could be counteracted with hard work. New to me was the idea that the goal in strength training is to push your muscles to the failure point. It is a simple process. You start an exercise with a comfortable level of weight at a higher number of repetitions, then progressively increase the weight and decrease the repetitions until essentially the muscle group you are exercising fails.

It's fascinating. One minute you can lift the weight; the next minute you can't. You can watch it happen. Your brain tells your muscles to lift, and a weight that under normal circumstances would be no problem at all goes up slowly, stops about halfway, hovers for a moment, then floats back down and you are spent.

What was new for me about this process was the idea that this "failure point" is the very thing that induces muscle growth. In the days following the exertion, the muscles actually *grow*—they recover and are more ready for the next challenge. In fact, if we don't push to the point of failure, we will find our results significantly decreased.

I believe the same thing is true of faith.

One perspective on what happened for Blair that day at the

magistrate's office in South Asia was that he failed. In a moment when he was called on to offer leadership and support to younger and less experienced staff, he fell short. And perhaps there is some truth to this perspective. But I think there is a much deeper story, one that helps explain who Blair has become as a courageous follower of Jesus. What happened that day for Blair is something that has undoubtedly happened for him many times before: his faith muscle simply reached the failure point. At the very point when he needed to exercise faith, he found himself incapable. God's power to act remained unaffected by Blair's faith, but Blair's ability to trust in God was simply depleted, exhausted.

If faith can be compared to a muscle, then Blair is someone who exercises it more than most of us. The very nature of the work he's chosen dictates that he is likely to hit failure points like these with some regularity. And if faith, like a muscle, grows best when it's been pushed to the failure point, then perhaps this offers some meaningful explanation for how Blair has become who he is today. Perhaps the steady exercise and growth of Blair's faith offers some perspective on why a challenging call to leave a life of safety and security to step out into a world of risk and uncertainty is something that Blair has wholeheartedly accepted. Blair came to IJM already familiar with what it looks and feels like to push one's faith to the failure point. He is a testimony to the truth that when faith is tested and pushed—especially to the failure point—it can recover stronger and more ready for the next challenge.

The resolution to Blair's story was not simple or quick. Eventually the crowd around his team dispersed. In DC we continued to pray, but resolution was slow to come. In the end, however, the magistrate did the right thing. All six slaves were given official certificates of freedom and enrolled in IJM's aftercare program.

Looking back, of course, it's much easier to see that God was the one in control. God was "on the hook" for the success

or failure of this operation. When we look into the Scriptures, we see that God was and is much more deeply concerned about each of these men and women than Blair or the rest of our IJM staff could have ever been. Blair reaching his failure point had no impact on God's willingness to act. Blair finding himself unable to muster the strength to pray did not limit God's willingness to rescue. Blair gave it his all. He left it all out on the field. The miracle was God's responsibility.

### **Discipleship at the Failure Point of Faith**

For most of us, learning to do anything requires the willingness to fail. An *unwillingness* to fail can be a significant barrier to learning. Gifted students are seldom limited by intellect; what undoes them most often is fear of failure. Why should it be any surprise that the same is true of faith? Any significant growth in faith will require risk and even failure. Understandably, this is uncomfortable. Especially as we get older, we become used to being successful and in control. Over time our comfort zone shrinks to encompass little more than the things we are good at and endeavors at which we can reasonably expect success.

God's gracious call to us is an invitation to pursue him out of our comfort zones and into a place where failure is a real possibility—perhaps even an inevitability. It's a call to follow God to places where dependence on him is a *necessity*. Because he loves us, God invites us into his work in the world. And if we accept, we will face problems so big, situations so complex, suffering so profound, evil so real and palpable that our faith in God will hit its failure point on a regular basis. But to shrink back from this invitation is to accept a lesser, weaker version of faith. To accept this invitation is to discover that the work of justice is significantly about our own discipleship.

## Questions to Consider

- What do you think of the concept of the failure point?
- As you look back over your faith journey, when have you experienced significant periods of growth? How are these periods of growth related to risk?
- Have you ever experienced a failure point in your faith? If so, what was that like?
- What are the kinds of challenges that are most likely to lead you to the failure point?

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Snap here with your smartphone or visit the link to reflect with Jim on the surprising benefits of hitting your own failure point.



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