

Scripture: Psalm 82 (ESV)

<p>82 God has taken his place in the divine council; in the midst of the <i>gods</i> he holds judgment:</p>	<p>A: YHWH stands and judges in the assembly of the <i>gods</i></p>
<p>² "How long will you judge unjustly and show partiality to the wicked? <i>Selah</i> ³ Give justice to the weak and the fatherless; maintain the right of the afflicted and the destitute. ⁴ Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked."</p>	<p>B: The <i>gods</i> are confronted over their unjust rule</p>
<p>⁵ They have neither knowledge nor understanding, they walk about in darkness; all the foundations of the earth are shaken.</p>	<p>C: The chaos left by the <i>gods</i> is described</p>
<p>⁶ I said, "You are <i>gods</i>, sons of the Most High, all of you; ⁷ nevertheless, like men you shall die, and fall like any prince."</p>	<p>B': The <i>gods</i> are confronted with their mortality</p>
<p>⁸ Arise, O God, judge the earth; for you shall inherit all the nations!</p>	<p>A': YHWH is asked to rise in the assembly and judge the earth.</p>

Let us pray.

August 25, 2019

"The Unselfing of America: Unself-Serving"

Psalm 82, Micah 6:6-8

"You are gods." I can feel you squirming in your seats. I can just imagine what would happen if I pointed to this congregation and told you, with all seriousness, that you are gods. I'm pretty sure my first sermon here would be my last. I'd get fired, and rightly so. I expect I would get escorted from the pulpit by a friendly member of our Church Safety Team – or perhaps led by my ear out of the building by Debe Colby.

Yet there are a number of people throughout history that have done just that - using Psalm 82 to try and teach that people are – or will become – divine. Some of them have largely faded into the pages of history. Some of them still preach in churches - or on TV screens - every Sunday morning; people like Kenneth Copeland, Creflo Dollar, and Joel Osteen.¹ Others may even live next door. Does anyone here have any Mormon² friends or neighbors? They see Psalm 82 as one of the sources of their beliefs.

Frankly, it's not hard to see how people come away from Psalm 82 with some crazy interpretations. The text itself is puzzling. As Eugene Peterson puts it:

"No passage in the Psalms is as theologically demanding of the translator. The translator's difficulty is that the same word for God, אֱלֹהִים ('elohim), is used twice but with different meanings. The first meaning is clearly the God of Israel, the Creator and Judge of the universe. But what is the second meaning?"³

In short, one simply cannot understand Psalm 82 properly without first cultivating an understanding of:

- Biblical languages⁴
- Scriptural context⁵
- Cultural context⁶
- The way the Israelite understanding of polytheism and monotheism changed over time⁷
- Writings from Rabbis and early church fathers⁸

And that's just for starters! There's no way I'm going to be able to dive into this level of detail today. If it interests you, please engage me in conversation, or take a look at the footnotes and additional material I've included in the printable sermon. For now, I'm going to let Eugene Peterson be our guide here:

"The first temptation narrated in Scripture is to "be like God." (Genesis 3:5). If I become like God, I do not need God."⁹

¹ *American Gospel*, Transition Studios, 2018. Also see Appendix A on Joel Osteen

² See Appendix B on Mormonism

³ Eugene Peterson, *Where Your Treasure Is*, p. 134

⁴ If you are interested in exploring linguistic issues, see Appendix F

⁵ If you are interested in exploring the broader Scriptural context, see Appendix F

⁶ If you are interested in exploring the cultural context, see Appendix F

⁷ For one example, see Cyrus H. Gordon, "אלהים in Its Reputed Meaning of Rulers, Judges," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 54 [1935]: 139-44.)

⁸ Eugene Peterson quotes Irenaeus of Lyons and Athanasius of Alexandria – two early church fathers – in ways that seem problematic. I've given some observations on what they actually said in Appendices C and D.

⁹ Eugene Peterson, *Where Your Treasure Is*, p. 130

In other words, trying to be like God inevitably results in moving from serving God and serving others to serving our own desires – serving our selves. But rather than grasping at being “like God”, we should follow the example of Jesus, *“who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.”* (Philippians 2:6-7)

Eugene Peterson underscores this when he lays out the traditional interpretation¹⁰ of Psalm 82.

“Using the context to interpret, we see that it denotes the human judges of Israel, who have been invested with a high, godlike work.¹¹ ... In their work they are “gods”. They suppose that in themselves they are gods and they can therefore do what they please, but they are not and therefore cannot.”

This raises some very important questions for us today.

- 1) What is the work that God has called us to, as His church?
- 2) What are some important pitfalls we need to avoid in trying to accomplish the work that God has given the church?
- 3) How can we be sure we are doing our work well as good and faithful servants?

1) What is the work that God has called us to, as His church?

Our primary mission is called the Great Commission – to go unto all the world and preach the Gospel, making disciples of all mankind.¹² Put another way, we are called to “BE the better place in the world”¹³, and our mission is to “to embrace, proclaim, and demonstrate the Kingdom of God”.¹⁴ In other words, as the church, we are called to be a colony of Heaven on earth, to act as Christ’s ambassadors.^{15,16}

Anything else we do needs to be done with this priority in mind. Fulfilling the Great Commission is not just our duty, but an act of working towards God’s justice¹⁷ - His ultimate vision for our destiny – His Kingdom come.

Speaking of justice – the pursuit of justice, advocacy for justice was a clear priority given to Israel’s rulers, it was a clear priority given to the church, and has been a clear priority of the church throughout history. It is one of the ways that we demonstrate the love of God.

So as we go about engaging people with the good news of the gospel wherever we are, we should keep our eyes open to ways that we can also advocate for justice. And as we look to advocate for justice, we need to keep in mind that our first priority as the church is to spread the good news of the gospel.

2) What are some important pitfalls we need to avoid in trying to accomplish the work that God has given the church?

One of the biggest temptations that we need to avoid as the church living among the world is believing that we can define right and wrong – that we can define “justice.”

¹⁰ For information on alternative interpretations,

¹¹ Eugene Peterson, *Where Your Treasure Is*, p. 134

¹² Matthew 28:16-20

¹³ John Nugent, *Endangered Gospel: How Fixing the World is Killing the Church*, pp. 77-78, p. 193

¹⁴ John Nugent’s formulation of the church’s mission in *Endangered Gospel: How Fixing the World is Killing the Church*, Ch.2 (p. 194). Shirley Guthrie describes the Church’s mission similarly in *Christian Doctrine*, p. 135.

¹⁵ Frank Viola, *The Insurgence: Reclaiming the Gospel of the Kingdom*, pp. 380-381

¹⁶ 2 Corinthians 5:11-21

¹⁷ Matthew 4:17

Joshua Sherman - First Presbyterian Church, Grand Junction

More than 600 years before Jesus, the prophet Habbakuk describes one of Israel's ancient enemies, the Chaldeans, by saying that 'their justice and dignity proceed from themselves.'¹⁸ This was not a good thing. Does that sound similar to our society today?

Ask any two Christians today, and you're likely to get two very different perspectives on the meaning of justice. We throw the word "justice" around on both sides of the political and theological spectrum as if we understand it in total. But too often, we fall into one of two camps that Dallas Willard calls "gospels of sin management."^{19,20}

- a) **On the more liberal side**, people tend to focus on social ills that need to be fixed, and push for "social justice", where justice – and sometimes even the gospel - is largely reduced to stopping exploitation and aiming to achieve better equality and distribution of resources.

This more liberal view is often driven more by something called Critical Theory than by careful exegesis of Scripture. Critical Theory²¹ involves analyzing any situation by identifying between the "oppressed" and the "oppressor", then automatically siding with those we have identified as the "oppressed". This sounds like a Biblical approach. Indeed – the Bible talks a lot about taking care of the poor, the oppressed, the widow, and the orphan. But I'll offer two notes of caution.

- 1) Analysis based on Critical Theory and applications of Biblical justice can actually be at odds with each other.²² Critical Theory entails siding with the poor and oppressed by default. But Biblical justice allows for an approach that actually looks at the context.

"Do not pervert justice; do not show partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great, but judge your neighbor fairly." (Leviticus 19:15)

- 2) Critical Theory is being used by some to identify the Church – or even God – as the "oppressor." This may be appropriate in some cases with the church – as it is made up of fallible, sinful human beings. But it is clearly erroneous when it comes to questioning God, as Job found out when he questioned God's application of justice in his life,

"The Lord said to Job: 'Will the one who contends with the Almighty correct him?' ... 'Would you discredit my justice?'" (Job 40:1-14)

People who view justice in this more liberal way can tend to get caught up in the tidal wave that the push for social justice has become in our broader society. The danger here is to focus so much on the push for social justice that we lose sight of this world's need for God's forgiveness and regeneration.

- b) **On the more conservative side**, people tend to focus on sin, atonement, and justification – as if the whole of the Gospel was that God allows us to avoid burning in Hell for eternity. To the outside world – indeed, even to more liberal Christians - this paints a picture of God that can seem cruel and vindictive. It doesn't tell the whole story!

¹⁸ Habakkuk 1:6-7

¹⁹ Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*, Chapter 2 (pp. 35-60)

²⁰ Frank Viola distinguishes similarly, between the gospel of legalism, the gospel of libertinism, and the gospel of the Kingdom of God, in *The Insurgence: Reclaiming the Gospel of the Kingdom*, Part 1, esp. pp. 31-40

²¹ Critical Theory <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/critical-theory/>

²² Critique of Critical Theory: <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/incompatibility-critical-theory-christianity/>

Our need for God's forgiveness and Jesus' atoning work on the cross is indeed absolutely central to the gospel!

But again, I would like to offer some notes of caution. Sometimes conservative Christians focus so much on humanity's sin, God's wrath, and Jesus' atonement that other aspects of the gospel – of who Jesus is – get minimized or ignored, and they can end up communicating an incomplete gospel.

People that hear such a gospel – on its own – can walk away without any understanding of:

- The inbreaking of the Kingdom of God here and now
- What the resurrection will mean for believers
- The fact that believers are called God's children – and co-heirs with Christ

In fact, we can be so eager to get people to want to go to Heaven that we can forget to actually describe what Heaven will be like! When we present Jesus simply as the sacrifice for our sins, and Heaven as some abstract place in the clouds, is it any wonder that so many people turn away from Jesus, away from Heaven, and turn toward the things of this world? Jesus IS the sacrificial lamb. But He is also Lord. Savior. Teacher. Master. Friend.

This conservative view can also be largely blind to issues of injustice occurring in the world around us. This doesn't seem a wise course of action given the importance that God gives to justice in Scripture.

So where do we go from here? The truth is, that both of these viewpoints are important. If we get stuck in the midst of fighting over which one of them is right, we're missing the point – and most likely missing our mission – as a church! Our view of justice and our view of the gospel are intricately connected, and the kind of gospel we preach directly impacts the kind of converts and disciples we make.^{23, 24, 25} So it's important that we get this right!

3) How can we be sure we are doing our work well as good and faithful servants?

Eugene Peterson gives some criteria that I think are helpful.

"We are godlike in our work because work originates in God and we are assigned to it by God. The intention of work is twofold: to continue the process of creation (Gen. 2:15) and to counter the consequences of sin (Gen. 3:17-19, 23)"²⁶

And again:

"Is your work resulting in victims or in celebrants?"²⁷

When it comes to fulfilling the Great Commission, the metrics seem pretty simple. Are we engaging the people around us with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control? Are we building bridges so we can share the hope we have in Christ – inviting them to join God's family by coming to faith in Jesus? Are we actually making converts – and disciples? Are we preaching the full gospel of the Kingdom of God, or a fast-food version of it that people will be more likely to walk away from when life gets hard?

But when it comes to exercising justice, metrics can be harder to come by. The way we measure success is too often colored through a conservative or liberal lens. I would argue that measuring success in

²³ Ronald Nash, *Social Justice and the Christian Church*, pp. 28-31 (Summary of Aristotle's view on different aspects of justice)

²⁴ John Nugent, *Endangered Gospel: How Fixing the World is Killing the Church*, Ch. 21 (pp. 175-181)

²⁵ Frank Viola, *The Insurgence: Reclaiming the Gospel of the Kingdom*, p. 39

²⁶ Eugene Peterson, *Where Your Treasure Is*, p. 138

²⁷ Eugene Peterson, *Where Your Treasure Is*, p. 138

advocating for justice requires us to start with a holistic, Biblical understanding of justice. And a truly Biblical understanding of Justice cannot proceed from our own understanding of justice, independent of what the Bible teaches. It MUST involve AT LEAST the following facets.

Shalom ("Harmony") and Advocacy^{28,29}

God created the world to be an orderly place – a place defined by the kind of wholeness, peace, and harmony that we understand when we dig into the meaning of the Hebrew word "shalom." He has punished (and will punish) those that act as agents of chaos, including a) fallen angels, b) unjust rulers, c) false teachers, and more. The Bible repeatedly calls for justice to be done – and proclaims judgment over rulers and nations that do not rule justly.

So our view of justice must be shaped by an understanding of Shalom, it must grow out of a Biblical view of advocacy, and we should advocate for justice accordingly.

Key questions:

- How is our view of justice shaped by God's repeated calls to care for the poor, oppressed, orphans, and widows?
- How is our view of justice shaped by our calling to be peacemakers?
- How is our view of justice shaped by the idea that God uses political powers as agents of order and judgment in this world?³⁰ (Even as wicked as they can be)
- How is our view of justice shaped by a recognition that seeking provision, enjoyment, and security apart from God pulls us away from a focus on the kingdom of God?^{31,32}

Righteousness and Mission^{33,34}

Our view of justice must be shaped by an understanding that our practice of justice springs from – and reflects – the nature of our hearts, and it must be shaped by our understanding of the church's mission and priorities.

Justice is connected to personal righteousness (justice and righteousness are both translated from the same word!)³⁵ These two are inseparable. This underscores that we cannot properly advocate for justice without preaching the full gospel – and that gospel includes the kind of repentance that opens the way for God to "create a clean heart" in us. As we advocate for justice, we must do so in a way that is consistent with our mission to *"go unto all the world and preach the Gospel, making disciples of all mankind."* (Mark 16:15)

Key questions:

- How is our view of justice shaped by the idea that justice flows from a righteous heart?

²⁸ Harmony (Shalom): Isaiah 9:6, Matthew 5:9, Romans 12:18, Revelation 21:5, Isaiah 65:17, New Jerusalem (City of Peace")

²⁹ Advocacy: Deuteronomy 10:18, James 1:27, Exodus 22:22, Exodus 23:23-26, Deuteronomy 24:17-21, Deuteronomy 27:19, 2 Samuel 12, Psalm 68:5, Psalm 82, Isaiah 1:17, Isaiah 1:23, Jeremiah 7:5-7, Jeremiah 22:3, Ezekiel 22:6-8, Zechariah 7:10, Malachi 3:5, Mark 12:38-44, Luke 20:45-47, 1 Timothy 5:3,

³⁰ Romans 13, Hebrews 13:17, Book of Daniel (notice how God uses one kingdom to sweep away an unjust kingdom.)

³¹ Frank Viola, *The Insurgence: Reclaiming the Gospel of the Kingdom*, pp. 243, 244

³² John Nugent, *Polis Bible Commentary, Genesis 1-11, vol. 1*, Genesis 4:17-24

³³ Righteousness: Matthew 5-7, Luke 6

³⁴ Mission: Mark 16:15

³⁵ The Greek terms we translate as "justice" and "righteousness" come from the same root, "dike", and form a cluster of meaning (Strong's #'s 1342-1349.) "Dikaioo" is the form used in the Septuagint (Greek) translation of Psalm 82, "Do justice to the humble and needy." "Dikaosune" is the form used in Matthew 6:33, "Seek you first the Kingdom of God, and His righteousness."

Joshua Sherman - First Presbyterian Church, Grand Junction

- How is our sense of justice and mission shaped by the call to repentance?³⁶
- Do we view the Great Commission as an act of justice? If not, why not?
- Are we trying to bring the Kingdom of God about through our own efforts, or recognizing that God is bringing the Kingdom?³⁷

Design and Destiny^{38, 39}

God's plan for our destiny is intricately connected to His original design. God created man and woman in His image, placed them in the Garden of Eden, and gave them a mandate to subdue the earth. For those that have accepted Jesus as Lord and Savior, God is molding us into His image and likeness. He will raise us up into incorruptible bodies, and bring us to a New Heaven, New Earth, and New Jerusalem, where we will worship Him and exercise authority/stewardship on His behalf.⁴⁰ Our view of justice must be shaped by these overarching realities.

Key questions:

- How is our view of justice shaped by the recognition that people are made in the image of God?
- How is our view of justice shaped by the recognition that Jesus preached about both Heaven and Hell? By the recognition that our words and actions can help people along the way to one destination or the other?
- How is our view of justice shaped by the realization that believers will be revealed as God's children and co-heirs with Christ?
- How is our view of justice shaped by the recognition that even our enemies have the potential to become family if they choose to follow Jesus and trust in Him for their salvation?

That's a lot to think about! It can be overwhelming! Still, I would encourage each of us to reflect on these things as we continue to explore what it means to be a church that both preaches the gospel and pursues justice in the world around us. One of the most important things we can do is pray.

As Eugene Peterson continually points out, prayer must be at the center of our lives – it must be at the center of our pursuit for justice. *"We think that when we pray we are getting God in on our operations. In fact He gets us in on His operations... we discover the job that He has given us to do."*⁴¹

So aligning ourselves to God's operations through prayer is one of the most effective ways to move us from being self-serving, to serving God, and serving others in the times, places, and situations where God has called us to serve. It's the best way to make sure that each of us is, in real-time, finding the most impactful way to live out our mission "to embrace, proclaim, and demonstrate the Kingdom of God".⁴²

With that in mind, let us pray.

³⁶ Repentance: Matthew 3:2, Matthew 4:17, Mark 1:4, Mark 6:12, Luke 3:3, Luke 5:32, Luke 13, Luke 24:46,47, Acts 2:38, Acts 3:19, Acts 8:22, Acts 13:24, Acts 17:30, Acts 19:4, Acts 20:21, Acts 26:20, Romans 2:4

³⁷ Frank Viola, *The Insurgence: Reclaiming the Gospel of the Kingdom*, p. 300

³⁸ Design: Genesis 1 and 2

³⁹ Destiny: Isaiah 65, Ezekiel 40-42, Daniel 12, Romans 8, 1 Corinthians 15, 1 John 3:1-3, Revelation 21-22

⁴⁰ The exact nature of this is unclear. In some cases, it seems to include only those who were martyred. In other cases, it might apply to all believers, but it's not clear-cut. Revelation 3, Revelation 20, Revelation 22. See Randy Alcorn, *Heaven*, Section 7 for one perspective on this.

⁴¹ Eugene Peterson, *Where Your Treasure Is*, p. 141

⁴² John Nugent's formulation of the church's mission in *Endangered Gospel: How Fixing the World is Killing the Church*, Ch.2 (p. 194). Shirley Guthrie describes the Church's mission similarly in *Christian Doctrine*, p. 135.

Appendix A: Joel Osteen as an example of errant Word of Faith teaching

Joel Osteen is a prime example of a subtle “you are gods” kind of thinking – thinking that we can **mechanistically, effectually** define reality with our words. In one of his latest books, he lays out a core principle of his teaching: “whatever follows your ‘I Am’ [statements about yourself] will find you.”⁴³ You may have heard of this teaching being referred to as the “law of attraction”. Or perhaps you’ve heard about the book “The Secret” that Oprah made so popular recently.

Joel sprinkles his teaching with just enough “quotes” from Scripture or mentions of Jesus to pass this off as Christian teaching, but the core of it has nothing to do with the Bible.

In case you think I’m being uncharitable to Joel’s teaching and ministry, I assure you I’m not. He views our positive thoughts and words as the **actual mechanism** through which good things find their way to us. This is not Biblical. It is based on the teachings of Phineas Quimby⁴⁴, and is closer to Christian Science than Christianity.

The way that Osteen uses Scripture to support his thinking shows that he has no real interest in “rightly dividing the Word of Truth!”⁴⁵ For instance, in his book, “The Power of I Am”, Osteen quotes Romans 4:17, saying, “Romans 4 says to, ‘call the things that are not as though they are.’”⁴⁶ Osteen makes it sound like Paul is encouraging – even commanding - believers to do this. But reading it in context, Paul is declaring the greatness of God, “the one who makes the dead alive and who calls the things that are not as though they are.” That’s right. Osteen is arguing that believers can – and should – do something only God can do!!!

His description of the story of Sarah and Abraham is similarly twisted.

“...Sarai has this promise from YHWH that as an older woman she was going to have a baby. YHWH knew that it would never come to pass unless He could convince Sarai to change her ‘I ams.’”⁴⁷

Let’s contrast this with a Biblical viewpoint in Genesis 18:12-15.

Sarah laughed when she heard the angels tell Abraham that she would bear a child at her age. YHWH responds – “What is this that Sarah laughed, saying, ‘Is it indeed true that I will bear a child, now that I have grown old?’ Is anything too difficult for Yahweh? At the appointed time I will return to you in the spring, and Sarah shall have a son.”

Sarah’s bearing Abraham a son was not a function of **her** belief- of her positive thinking. It was something **YHWH** did, because YHWH chose to do so.

James 4:2-3 clearly contradicts this thinking. “You do not have because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.” Asking God for something in prayer – making a request⁴⁸– is very different from just focusing on what you want and repeatedly claiming that the universe will bring it to you. So Osteen’s core principle fails a very simple test when it comes to Scripture.⁴⁹

⁴³ Joel Osteen, *The Power of I Am*, p. 2

⁴⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phineas_Quimby

⁴⁵ 2 Timothy 2:15

⁴⁶ Joel Osteen, *The Power of I Am*, p. 8

⁴⁷ Joel Osteen, *The Power of I Am*, p. 6

⁴⁸ Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*, pp.231-243

⁴⁹ As do many Word of Faith preachers that teach what amounts to a Prosperity Gospel. They will reap what they sow. (Mark 12:38-44, Luke 20:45-47)

Joshua Sherman - First Presbyterian Church, Grand Junction

Furthermore, Osteen has said in interviews that his 'ministry' is "about helping people of all faiths live a better life." That is the very definition of a self-help speaker. No mention of sin. No mention of a Savior. No mention of renouncing other gods. No mention of repentance. It has absolutely NOTHING to do with the gospel of Jesus Christ!

Positive thinking in and of itself is a useful tool, but thinking of it as the mechanism through which good things find their way to us is naïve and not Biblical. The centrality of positive thinking – rather than prayer – to Osteen's teaching is dangerous because it disconnects us from the true nature of the Kingdom of YHWH – and our relationship with YHWH.

Appendix B: Mormon Theology

Joseph Smith taught that, *"God himself was once as we are now, and is an exalted man, and sits enthroned in yonder heavens! ... It is the first principle of the Gospel to know for a certainty the Character of God, and to know that we may converse with him as one man converses with another, and that he was once a man like us; yea, that God himself, the Father of us all, dwelt on an earth, the same as Jesus Christ himself did."*⁵⁰

On the surface, a Biblical view of *divinization* (1 Corinthians 15, Romans 8, 1 John 3, John 1, and Daniel 10) can sound similar to the Mormon idea of our destiny. But their ideas of our destiny are not Biblical. Whatever it means to become fully "children of God", we won't become divine in the same way that God is divine. We won't be given our own planets to rule. Any authority/stewardship we have will be exercised on God's behalf. It will not be autonomous. (Revelation 3, 20, 22.)

Mormon beliefs distort our view of YHWH. In their view, YHWH the Father was *our* creator. But he was also once human (before being the YHWH of Israel – this goes beyond just the incarnation of Jesus.) They believe that we can become gods in exactly the same way that YHWH the Father was once human and became divine. This denies the uniqueness of YHWH, and ultimately undermines the view that YHWH created us (if He was originally human, then someone else had to create him!) I see no Scriptural basis for these points of their theology, and plenty of Scriptures that weigh against them.

Appendix C: Irenaeus of Lyons

Eugene Peterson quotes Irenaeus of Lyons, saying "[God] became what we are that he might make us in the end what he is."

This is a partial and somewhat misleading use of Irenaeus. To add more context, Irenaeus says, *"...following the only true and steadfast Teacher, the Word of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, who did, through His transcendent love, become what we are, that He might bring us to be even what He is Himself."*⁵¹

This sounds like a statement that we will become fully, *in nature*, God.

But the surrounding context of Irenaeus' writings – and indeed the context of his overall task – show that this is reading something into the text that really isn't there.

Irenaeus was arguing against Gnostic teaching on two fronts.

⁵⁰ *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, sel. Joseph Fielding Smith, Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1938, pp. 345–46.

⁵¹ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies*, Preface to Book V.

Joshua Sherman - First Presbyterian Church, Grand Junction

- 1) Gnostics almost universally denied the incarnation of Jesus, and His bodily resurrection. Gnostics believed in a neo-Platonic dualism – that both spirit and physical exist. Spirits are pure, physical things are corrupted.
- 2) Many Gnostics believed that there were two kinds of people – spiritual and natural. The natural (or physical) person had no chance at salvation. The spiritual person contained in them a “spark of the divine”, and they would eventually be saved through the attainment of proper, secret knowledge. In their minds, a spiritual person was already divine, and they just needed to recognize this.

So Irenaeus was arguing two things.

- 1) Whatever it means that we become made in God’s likeness, this is part of a process – not something we have already obtained, and not something we can obtain through our own efforts
- 2) We will become what Jesus is, in the sense that Jesus was resurrected, with a physical, glorified body. We will be too! (1 Corinthians 15.)

To illustrate this second point, Irenaeus clarified what it means to be called God’s “children.”

“According to nature, then – that is, according to creation... we are all sons of YHWH, because we have been created by YHWH. But with respect to obedience and doctrine we are not all the sons of YHWH: those only are so who believe in Him and do His will.”⁵²

Understanding Irenaeus’ statement about becoming what Jesus is, must therefore be read in the context of the preceding chapters (esp. Book IV, ch’s 37 and 38), and the following chapter (Book V, Chapter 1.)

Appendix D: Athanasius of Alexandria

Athanasius interpreted Psalm 82 in a way that we find confusing and potentially problematic today, “He [Jesus] became man that we might become God.”⁵³ That might seem like a powerful argument against the traditional interpretation of Psalm 82, but it’s not.

First, it’s based on a questionable translation. It might be better translated, “[Jesus] became man that we might become god-like.”

Even along those lines, Athanasius is not proposing that humans will be able to claim any kind of equality with God – or even claim to fully take hold of divine nature.

This becomes clear when we dig a little deeper into what Athanasius meant, by looking at his other writings.

“...to become as the Father, is impossible for us creatures... for as, although there be one Son by nature, True and Only-begotten, we too become sons, not as He in nature and truth, but according to the grace of Him that calls.”⁵⁴

Appendix E: Contrast between the Church and the powers

Understanding the relationship – and contrast – between the church and the powers (governments) that God put(s) in place to establish law and order is important when discussing issues of justice.

⁵² Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies*, IV:41

⁵³ Eugene Peterson, *Where Your Treasure Is*, p. 129.

⁵⁴ Athanasius of Alexandria, *Third Discourse Against the Arians*, 19.

Joshua Sherman - First Presbyterian Church, Grand Junction

On the one hand, the mission that God gives to the powers and to the church is different.

- The powers are established to maintain order and to rule justly
- The church was given the mission to make disciples of all mankind

Unfortunately, the powers do not always exercise their authority with justice. It seems reasonable – and quite right – for the church to rebuke the powers when they do so – as we see the prophets do a number of times throughout the Old Testament. (While the prophets were primarily focused on speaking to Israel on God’s behalf, they also issued warnings to surrounding nations and their kings – Babylon, Tyre, etc.)

It also seems quite right for the church to step into situations where the poor, oppressed, orphans, and widows are not being taken care of by society, or by the powers, and give aid as they can – provided that the poor, oppressed, orphans, and widows among the church are first cared for. This seems cold, but is an important point of witness to the outside world.

What, then, should believers do if they have the chance to join the government and try to influence them to rule with greater justice, promote righteousness, etc.? This is not an easy question! At the end of the day, I can only encourage believers in such situations to be aware of the pitfalls, and be prayerful about how/when to engage, and how/when to disengage.

On the one hand, they may be able to do a lot of good! On the other, they may be asked to compromise their beliefs in ways that are unacceptable. They may be asked to give greater allegiance to the kingdom they work for than they give to the Kingdom of God – in this, they must refuse. They may be tempted to bring about good through the exercise of their own power/force. This can often lead people to place their ultimate allegiance in power, and not in God. They must be aware of this, and cautious in doing so.

Believers in such positions of power may be tempted to encourage righteous behavior among their citizens by the laws and policies they pass. They should be prayerful in determining when this boils into a kind of legalism. This is tantamount to becoming new Pharisees. (The Pharisees believed that Messiah would come – the Kingdom of God would come – when the people of Israel acted with enough obedience to the law. Do we believe we can bring about God’s kingdom in a similar way?)

Believers in such positions of power may also find themselves encouraging a “Christendom” mentality among their citizens – where people assume they are Christians simply by being citizens. This is dangerous to true faith, as it cheapens what it actually means to be a Christian, leads people to believe they are Christians without really knowing much about the Christian faith, and leads people to be comfortable in their “Christian faith” without them actually living as if they are Christians – without them pursuing the mission that God gave the church!^{55, 56}

Appendix F: Digging deeper in Scriptural, Cultural, and Linguistic Context

Understanding Psalm 82 deeply involves a lot of further study. Some of this study can get pretty confusing! If any of this interests you, please engage with Joshua directly, either in person, or at worshipleader@firstpresgj.org. He should be able to provide some good resources and perspective for further study.

Appendix G: Perspective on References Used

⁵⁵ Soren Kierkegaard, *Attack on Christendom*, in entirety

⁵⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*

Joshua Sherman - First Presbyterian Church, Grand Junction

I quote/reference a few sources that can be controversial. I have been careful to reference them when I feel one of their specific statements or views is relevant and points to the truth. That does not mean I agree with their entire viewpoint.

John Nugent

John is part of the Restoration Movement. They tend to be quite insistent on having the church get back to the way the church acted during the 1st Century A.D., as much as possible. I think this position is extreme, and that it can be hard to apply such a framework to the way the church should act in a context that is so different from the 1st Century A.D. His book, *Endangered Gospel*, was an interesting read. Whether or not I agree with his statements about the church and pursuit of justice depends on how they are interpreted. If one takes his statements as “the church must always/never do...”, then I disagree with him most of the time. I do not take him to mean this in general, and he seems to be clear that creating hard/fast rules is not his intent. If this were true, his book would be hopelessly contradictory.

Rather, I think he is right about the centrality of our mission to embrace, proclaim, and demonstrate the Kingdom of God. Therefore, I find his book a useful lens through which to examine the church’s pursuit of justice, because it asks the right *questions* about our pursuit of justice (or really, any other activity) in light of the mission God has given us, and the priority this must take in our discipleship and life together. I agree with him that God is the one bringing about the Kingdom (therefore, it’s something we help bring about primarily by fulfilling our mission, not through exercises of power. We cannot bring about the Kingdom through human means.)

Frank Viola

Frank has been quite controversial ever since he and Frank Barna published *Pagan Christianity* – an attempt to point out how much of church tradition and activity we’ve actually borrowed from Pagan traditions. I think there is some validity to his critique – especially as it comes to critiquing Constantinian influence and the era of “Christendom.” I agree with him that blending Christianity and worldly power often results in a twisting of the gospel – endangering people by making them feel like they are Christians by virtue of being part of a “Christian nation/society”, without really understanding what it means to declare that “Jesus is Lord”, the impact of “taking up one’s cross to follow Jesus”, etc. But I also think he goes too far. I think some of his contentions in *Pagan Christianity* reflect a one-sided, somewhat inaccurate reading of history.

He is an advocate for alternative approaches to the *ekklesia* (church), like home churches, small groups, etc.) I think these are great supplements to involvement in the more formal church, but that posing them as substitutes is problematic. Still, I see value in his perspective because he is laser-focused on the central importance of the Gospel of the Kingdom of God.

American Gospel: In Christ Alone

I think this is an eye-opening film for people that aren’t familiar with Word of Faith or Prosperity teaching. It rightly refutes so much of what they teach and do.

My only hesitation is that their pushback comes from a viewpoint of the gospel that is perhaps too laser-focused on Jesus’ atoning work on the cross enabling believers to avoid hell. The atonement is indeed central, essential, and pivotal – without it, we could not take hold of the rest of the good news of the gospel! So I don’t mean to deny the centrality or necessity of the atonement in any way. But I think the danger of being focused too tightly on the atonement is that it can actually present an incomplete Gospel – leaving out or minimizing much of the rest of the truly impactful good news. For instance:

- a. Focusing too tightly on the atonement can tend to minimize the importance of the resurrection and what it means for our future hope!

- b. Focusing too tightly on the atonement can feed into a legalistic approach, where it seems that, for all practical purposes, Jesus is still on the cross, paying for every individual sin we commit.
- c. Focusing too tightly on the atonement tends to minimize focus on what that atonement actually enables us to do/be. Through Jesus we are not only forgiven, but invited into God's family as adopted sons and daughters, and co-heirs with Christ. I don't think we have remotely begun to understand what this means, and how amazing it is!
- d. Focusing tightly on the atonement tends to come hand in hand with a vague discussion of "heaven" as our eventual destination. I think a vague, spiritual view of the afterlife is highly problematic – driven more by the influence Greek philosophers (like Plato) had on the views of the church than by a solid understanding of Scripture. Our resurrection will be a bodily resurrection! We're not going to spend eternity floating around in the clouds. We will spend it with God, in the New Jerusalem, where the New Heavens and New Earth (or Renewed Heavens and Renewed Earth) meet. We will worship God, fellowship, and do important work as part of the everlasting Kingdom. While we don't want to go too far asserting what the afterlife will be like, I think our vague, out-of-focus, black-and-white approach is pale in comparison to the living color we see in Scripture. Getting people to understand the glory of our destiny is key in helping them disconnect from the destructive things this life holds out as temptations.
- e. Focusing too tightly on the atonement can tend to eclipse the fact that Jesus came not just as Savior, but also as Lord. He came as the King, declaring the coming of the Kingdom of God. The fact that the failing systems of power and influence we see around us are fading away – and someday will be no more – is good news! The fact that God's future is breaking into our present is good news!

In summary, I think the good news of the Gospel includes good news about Jesus' atoning work, Jesus' resurrection, our adoption into God's family, our destiny involving the New Heavens/New Earth/New Jerusalem and resurrected, incorruptible bodies, and the breaking in of the Kingdom of God – both here and now in part, and eventually in total. While American Gospel presents a needed pushback against Word of Faith and Prosperity teaching, their pushback tends to focus mostly on presenting the atonement as the correct alternative gospel. Whenever they do so at the exclusion of these other points of good news, I see them as presenting an incomplete Gospel themselves. Yes, the atonement is what makes our participation in the rest of the good news possible, but that doesn't imply/entail that the atonement is the entirety of the good news!

We should follow the precedent established by Jesus and Paul.

Jesus preached both the coming of the Kingdom of God *and* repentance.

"17 From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." (Matthew 4:17)

Paul did the same:

"13 For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, 14 in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins." (Colossians 1:13)

"Having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all everywhere should repent" (Acts 17:30)