Shalom as Justice: Honoring the Postmodern Longing for Justice While Reimagining Its Fulfillment

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Abstract

Contemporary helping professions, counseling chief among them, have made social justice, equity, and advocacy central to professional identity. Much of this turn is shaped by postmodern thought, which has taught a generation to be suspicious of power, attentive to the marginalized, and skeptical of claims to neutral objectivity. This paper takes those contributions seriously rather than dismissively. Drawing on personal experience in county government, clinical training, and the daily work of fatherhood, and writing transparently from a Confessional Lutheran worldview, I argue that the postmodern longing for justice is largely right in its diagnosis but incomplete in its prescription. The Hebrew concept of shalom, denoting wholeness, right relationship, and flourishing, offers not a rejection of the justice impulse but its fuller realization. Where prevailing frameworks often locate injustice exclusively in external structures and risk reducing persons to demographic categories, a shalom-shaped justice begins with the interior reordering of the person, honors the dignity of every individual as an image-bearer, and moves outward toward reconciliation rather than mere rebalancing. Integrating forgiveness therapy, logotherapy, and acceptance-based approaches with biblical and philosophical sources, the paper sketches what a restorative, person-centered justice could look like in clinical and civic practice.

Keywords: shalom, justice, postmodernism, forgiveness, restorative justice, counseling ethics, worldview transparency, imago Dei

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I begin with a confession, in two senses of that word. The first is the ordinary one: a disclosure of where I stand. I write as a Confessional Lutheran Christian, and I do not pretend that this is a neutral vantage point. No one writes from nowhere. Every claim about justice rests on prior assumptions about what human beings are, what they owe one another, and what their flourishing consists of (Collins, 1993; Entwistle, 2015; Slife et al., 2012). To name one's worldview at the outset is not a weakness in argument; it is a precondition of honest argument, and it is, ironically, one of the convictions the postmodern tradition has done most to recover. The second sense of confession is older and more Lutheran still: an admission that I am *simul justus et peccator*, at once justified and sinful, both wounded and capable of wounding. I cannot write about justice as though I stood outside the problem. That posture shapes everything that follows.

This paper grows out of two experiences that will not let me go. The first is fatherhood. I have a son, and more than any argument, he is the reason I care about justice at all. My deepest hope is that he will be known for what he does in word and deed rather than judged by outward appearance or heritage, that he will be seen, in Dr. King's enduring phrase, for the "content of their character" (King, 2001). I cannot read the great documents of justice as abstractions; I read them as a father, asking whether the world they describe is one my son will be free to live in.

The second experience is civic. As a previous member of the Winnebago County (Wisconsin) Public Board of Health and the Winnebago County Human Services Board, I have watched, up close, what happens when good intentions about justice meet the concrete lives of suffering people—both in good and bad cases. I will return to a particular episode, a homeless

encampment at our county courthouse, because it taught me something I could not have learned from books. Between these two experiences sits my clinical training as a counselor, where the abstractions of "justice" and "advocacy" resolve into a single real person in a real chair, asking for help.

My thesis is this: the dominant, largely postmodern account of social justice is right about a great deal and yet leaves us wanting, and the older Hebrew vision of shalom offers not the opposite of justice but its fullness. Shalom is justice grown up. My aim is not to win an argument against postmodern thought but to honor what it sees, name what it misses, and sketch what a more whole-making justice could look like in practice.

What the Postmodern Turn Sees Rightly

The word *postmodern* is used loosely and often as an epithet, so let me be specific and generous. At its best, the postmodern tradition is a discipline of suspicion aimed at our self-congratulation. Lyotard (1984) famously characterized the postmodern condition as an incredulity toward metanarratives, a refusal to take on faith the grand, totalizing stories that cultures tell to justify themselves. Foucault (1980) taught a generation to notice that knowledge and power are entangled, that what a society calls normal, healthy, or just often encodes the interests of those who hold authority. The critical theory from which much contemporary social-justice scholarship descends made the structural analysis of domination its central task and rejected the pretense of value-neutral observation (Horkheimer, 1972).

These are not contemptible insights. They are, in important respects, true, and a Christian of all people should be able to say so. The postmodern suspicion of self-serving universals is a secular echo of something the Hebrew prophets and the Lutheran Reformers knew well: that the human heart is "deceitful above all things" (Jeremiah 17:9, NIV), endlessly inventive in dressing

up its own advantage as righteousness. When Taylor (2007) describes the social imaginaries through which we tacitly understand our common life, he is naming something the doctrine of original sin already anticipated, that our perception is bent, our reason interested, our claimed neutrality a fiction. The counseling profession's own insistence that no clinician is worldview-free (Collins, 1993; Entwistle, 2015) is the same insight in a clinical key. Smith (2006), writing for a wary Christian audience, argued that the church has more to learn from Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault than it fears, that their critiques of pretended objectivity can chasten Christian arrogance and recover the situated, embodied, tradition-dependent character of all knowing.

So I will not begin where some of my fellow believers begin, with alarm. The postmodern attention to power, to the voices of the marginalized, to the way "objectivity" can mask domination, and to the situatedness of all knowledge, these are gifts. They have made me a better board member and, hopefully, a better counselor. They have taught me to ask, in the moment I am most certain that I am helping, whose interests my certainty actually serves.

Indeed, Scripture's own concern for the vulnerable runs deeper than any modern framework. "Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed" (Isaiah 1:17, NIV). "Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves" (Proverbs 31:8, NIV). The God of the Bible is relentlessly on the side of the widow, the orphan, the stranger, and the poor. If the postmodern conscience has rediscovered that the powerful tend to write the rules in their own favor, it has rediscovered something the prophets thundered three millennia ago. To honor that rediscovery is not to capitulate to a fashion; it is to recognize a partial truth and to ask where it might be made whole.

Where the Account Leaves Us Wanting

And yet a diagnosis is not a cure, and suspicion is not a home. Here I want to be careful, because it would be easy to turn a real limitation into a caricature. My claim is not that postmodern justice frameworks are malicious; many of their proponents are moved by genuine compassion. My claim is that, left to themselves, they leave us without enough to build on.

The first difficulty is the one MacIntyre (1981) named: when moral discourse loses a shared account of human nature and human ends, it decays into competing assertions of preference that cannot be rationally adjudicated. If we are incredulous toward all metanarratives, we have no stable ground from which to say that any particular arrangement is unjust, only that we prefer a different distribution of power. Justice then becomes, in practice, whatever the currently ascendant coalition declares it to be, and the question of who decides what is just, and by what authority, becomes unanswerable (Haidt, 2012). The suspicion that unmasks every claim to neutrality cannot exempt its own claims; the tool that deconstructs all foundations leaves nothing left to stand on.

The second difficulty is anthropological. Much contemporary justice work, drawing on its critical-theory lineage (Goodman et al., 2004; Horkheimer, 1972; Vera & Speight, 2003), tends to locate injustice almost entirely in external structures and to sort persons by their position within those structures: oppressor or oppressed, privileged or marginalized. There is real truth here, for structures do oppress. But a framework that reads persons primarily through demographic category risks two errors at once. It can flatten the irreducible individual into a sociological abstraction, and it can quietly relocate evil entirely outside the self, as though restructuring institutions could produce justice while the human heart remained untouched. Scripture will not allow this. “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23,

NIV). Injustice has a structural face, but it has a personal root (Plantinga, 1995). To forget the second is to build reforms on sand.

The third difficulty I learned not from a book but from a courthouse.

During my service in county government, a homeless encampment grew at the Winnebago County Courthouse. Under the banner of social justice, the prevailing policy conversation increasingly favored preserving and even encouraging the encampment as an act of advocacy for a marginalized population. The intention was humane. But many human services the population actually needed went largely unprovided, and the framework that produced the policy could not see the costs it imposed. Ongoing drug use within the encampment obstructed the very substance-abuse counseling that might have helped, and it compromised the safety of others entering the courthouse, including victims of violent crime arriving to seek legal protection and social services. In the name of one marginalized group, other equally vulnerable people, those in recovery and those who had been traumatized, were rendered invisible. Justice had become a zero-sum exercise in which some voices were amplified and others simply disappeared from view.

I do not tell this story to score a point. I tell it because it disclosed to me the limit of a justice that sees people primarily as members of categories. When the category becomes the unit of moral concern, the person inside the category can be sacrificed to the symbol. Lipsky's (1980) classic study of street-level bureaucracy showed how the discretion of frontline workers comes to reflect institutional priorities; when those priorities become ideological rather than person-centered, the suffering individual is the one who pays. I watched committees adopt the vocabulary of equity and justice while the single mother seeking help for her child, the veteran needing treatment, and the disabled neighbor trying to reach services went on waiting. This is

what Sowell (2023) calls the pursuit of cosmic justice, a quest for perfect categorical rebalancing that generates its own injuries.

So I do not reject the postmodern longing for justice. I share it. But I have seen what happens when that longing is left unanchored, impersonal, and unbounded, and I have gone looking for something more whole—a center that holds to absolute truth without enthroning man as its arbiter. Postmodernism, at its furthest reach, denies that such a truth exists; modernism, at its most confident, made man the measure of all things. Shalom stands between them: it confesses a truth higher than human consensus, yet humbler than human pride—grounded not in our certainty but in God.

Shalom: Justice Made Whole

The something more whole has a name in the Hebrew Scriptures: shalom. We translate it "peace," but the word is far larger than the absence of conflict. Shalom names wholeness, completeness, right relationship, and flourishing, the restoration of all things to the order God intended (Wolterstorff, 2008). Plantinga (1995) calls it universal flourishing, wholeness, and delight, a condition in which each creature has its own integrity and contributes to the thriving of the whole. Crucially, Wolterstorff (2008) argues that justice is not the rival of shalom but its constitutive element: there is no genuine peace without right relationships, and no right relationships without justice. To pursue shalom is therefore to pursue justice, but a justice ordered toward restoration rather than mere rebalancing, toward healing rather than retribution.

This reframing matters because it dissolves a false binary that haunts our public life: the supposed choice between a justice that is fierce but loveless and a peace that is gentle but unjust. Shalom refuses the choice. It is a third option, not a compromise between two inadequate poles but a more original vision that includes what each was reaching for. The prophets did not pit

justice against peace; they wedded them. “Righteousness and peace kiss each other” (Psalm 85:10, NIV).

A shalom-shaped justice begins with a particular account of the human person, and here the contrast with the prevailing account is sharpest and most fruitful. Every person bears the *imago Dei*, the image of God (Genesis 1:27, NIV). Dignity is therefore intrinsic and equal, not conferred by social status, productivity, group membership, or political alignment, and not removable by any of them. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights affirms the inherent dignity of all persons (United Nations, 1948), though it cannot supply the metaphysical ground that theological anthropology provides. At the same time, and without contradiction, every person is a sinner (Romans 3:23, NIV). This dual reality, dignity and depravity together, is precisely what the oppressor-oppressed binary cannot hold. It refuses to divide humanity cleanly into the righteous and the guilty, because it knows that the line between good and evil runs through every heart. The Lutheran formula *simul justus et peccator* captures it exactly: each of us is at once saint and sinner, deserving of justice and in need of mercy. A justice built on this anthropology can be both tender and truthful. It can defend the vulnerable fiercely (Isaiah 1:17, NIV) while refusing to demonize anyone, because it knows the same fault line runs through the defender.

This is why a shalom-shaped justice begins, of all places, within. Scripture locates both the origin of injustice and the spring of restoration in the human heart (Ezekiel 36:26; Jeremiah 17:9, NIV). Jesus taught that one must “first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye” (Matthew 7:5, NIV); self-examination precedes external correction. Augustine (1998) framed justice as rightly ordered love, flowing from the proper ordering of one’s affections toward God and neighbor, so that

justice is first a virtue of the soul before it is a condition of society. This is not a retreat into private piety. It is a claim about sequence and source: one cannot give what one does not possess, and a person whose interior life is disordered will export that disorder into every structure they touch, however enlightened the structure's design.

The Person as the First Site of Justice

Here my clinical work and my theology converge, and here too the prevailing framework and the shalom framework diverge most practically. When justice is conceived as something that must be extracted from others or from systems, the suffering person is positioned as helpless, dependent for wellbeing on forces entirely outside their control (Bandura, 2001). This is not compassion; it can be a subtle cruelty, because it tells the wounded that nothing will be well until the whole world is remade. A shalom-shaped justice says something different and, I think, more hopeful: that there is a domain of justice no oppressor can finally seize, the interior life of the person.

Frankl (1985), writing from inside the concentration camps, testified that the last of the human freedoms is the ability to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances. No system conferred that freedom, and no system could revoke it. Contemporary clinical science says much the same in its own idiom. Acceptance and Commitment Therapy locates well-being not in the control of external conditions but in psychological flexibility, the capacity to be present, to accept difficult internal experiences without avoidance, and to act in line with chosen values regardless of circumstances (Hayes et al., 2012). Forgiveness therapy demonstrates, with three decades of empirical support, that an injured person can release resentment and recover peace whether or not the offender ever repents or even knows (Enright, 2001; Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2015). Meta-analyses confirm that forgiveness interventions produce significant

reductions in depression, anxiety, and anger and gains in hope and self-esteem (Baskin & Enright, 2004; Wade et al., 2014), and that they help even survivors of severe harm, such as women recovering from spousal emotional abuse (Reed & Enright, 2006). Worthington's (2006) REACH model gives this interior work a clinical structure.

I want to be precise about what I am and am not saying. I am not telling the oppressed to forgive and be quiet. Forgiveness is not the denial of injustice; it names harm honestly and refuses to let that harm have the final word in the victim's soul (Freedman & Zarifkar, 2016). Nor is interior work a substitute for addressing real structural barriers (Sue et al., 2019). I am saying that to begin with the person's interior freedom is to begin with the one thing injustice cannot fully reach, and that this beginning is empowering rather than dismissive. It restores to the suffering person an agency that a purely structural account quietly takes away. When I sit with a client, I am not first trying to recruit them into a movement; I am trying to help them discover the peace, meaning, and moral agency that are theirs to keep. That is justice within, and it is the soil from which everything else grows.

This is also why personal accountability belongs at the center rather than the margin of justice. To take responsibility for what is mine, rather than deflecting it onto systems, others, or circumstances, is itself an act of interior reordering (Sande, 2004). Grace does not abolish consequences; it reframes them within a redemptive trajectory. A justice that names only the sins of others, and never one's own, is the very hypocrisy Jesus warned against (Matthew 23:27–28, NIV).

And I cannot pretend this is merely professional. The interior work I commend to clients is the work I do as a father. I want my son to inherit, more than any policy, a settled conviction

of his own God-given dignity that no insult and no injustice can dislodge, and I know I can only hand him what I have first received.

The Cruciform Pattern: A Justice That Empties Itself

The more I sit with clients in the work of forgiveness, the more convinced I become that forgiveness is cross-shaped. To forgive is not to pretend the debt does not exist; it is to decline to collect it. The forgiver absorbs the cost of the wrong rather than passing it back to the one who caused it, refusing the satisfaction of repayment and releasing a claim that was, by every ordinary accounting, justly owed (Volf, 1996). This is why forgiveness can be granted before the feelings follow, and whether or not the offender ever repents: Worthington (2006) distinguishes the decision to forgive from the slower emotional replacement of bitterness with goodwill, and the final movement of his REACH model—to hold onto forgiveness when resentment returns—names forgiveness as a daily, repeated act rather than a single transaction. Clinically, this is profoundly freeing, because it locates the work in the client's will rather than in the offender's cooperation or in the client's own unruly emotions. And it does not trivialize the harm: the debt is not erased but handed over, entrusted to the God who alone judges rightly (Romans 12:19, NIV). The forgiver lays down the right to retribution precisely because Someone more competent has taken it up.

I have come to see that this self-emptying is not merely a clinical technique but the very shape of the Gospel. Paul writes that Christ, "being in very nature God," did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited for his own advantage but "made himself nothing," taking the nature of a servant, and "humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross" (Philippians 2:6–8, NIV). The One who possessed every privilege surrendered all of them. He did not cling to status, to vindication, or to the rights that were genuinely his; he laid them

down for the good of those who had wronged him. If this is the character of God, then justice made whole cannot finally look like self-assertion, the seizing of what one is owed. It looks like self-giving. Shalom is cruciform before it is anything else.

And we are called into the same pattern. Jesus told his followers to deny themselves and "take up their cross daily" and follow him (Luke 9:23, NIV). But everything depends on how this call is heard. Luther distinguished the theologian of glory, who seeks God in strength, achievement, and self-justification, from the theologian of the cross, who finds God hidden in weakness, suffering, and the honest confession of need (Forde, 1997). Taking up one's cross is not a heroic performance, a display of righteousness that earns admiration or merit. It is humble and penitent—the daily mortification of the self-justifying self, the whole of the Christian life understood as repentance. Here a Lutheran must keep the order right: we do not empty ourselves in order to ascend, nor do our crosses add anything to what Christ has already finished. We can pour ourselves out only because we have first been filled by the One who emptied himself for us. Cross-bearing is the fruit of grace received, never the price of grace sought.

This reframes the whole enterprise of justice, and it sharpens the warning I have raised about advocacy. There is a way of pursuing justice that is, in Luther's terms, a theology of glory: it accrues moral credit by naming the sins of others, it secures the advocate's standing, and it asks no repentance of the one who wields it. The performative advocacy I have watched fail the suffering is exactly this—justice as self-display. The cruciform pattern asks something harder and quieter. It asks me to take the plank from my own eye first (Matthew 7:5, NIV), to approach even genuine injustice from a posture of penitence rather than superiority, and to be willing to bear a cost rather than impose one. In this, the cross fulfills what the postmodern suspicion of power could only begin: it is the most thoroughgoing critique of every self-justifying claim—

including my own—and yet it does not abandon us to suspicion's despair, because the same cross that exposes us also forgives us. A justice that empties itself can afford to be honest about its own sin, because it is already secure in grace.

From the Person Outward: Advocacy Without Idolatry

If justice begins within, it does not stay there. Shalom presses outward, into relationships, communities, and structures. But the movement outward must preserve what was learned within, or it curdles into the very thing it opposed. Here a distinction the contemporary literature often blurs becomes essential: the difference between client advocacy and social-change advocacy.

Client advocacy is the bounded, ethically mandated work of helping the actual person before me navigate the systems that affect their life: securing accommodations for a client with a disability, writing a letter of medical necessity, connecting a veteran to earned benefits (American Counseling Association [ACA], 2014). It is initiated by the client's identified needs, governed by informed consent, and measured by that client's welfare. Social-change advocacy is a broader enterprise aimed at transforming institutions, policies, and cultural norms (Dollarhide et al., 2021; Ratts, 2009). It is a legitimate civic activity, but it is driven by the advocate's vision of what society should be, a vision shaped, inevitably, by worldview and political commitment, and it does not require the consent or even the presence of any particular client (Soldner et al., 2022). The Good Samaritan, we should remember, did not lobby the Jericho road-safety commission; he knelt, bound wounds, and bore the cost himself (Luke 10:25–37, NIV). Both responses to suffering have value. But the biblical pattern of service begins with the person, is marked by personal sacrifice, and is measured by tangible impact on the one in need, not by the sophistication of the advocate's framework.

The danger is not advocacy; it is advocacy that becomes its own end. When advocacy is performed rather than rendered, it satisfies the moral identity of the advocate while leaving the sufferer untouched. I watched this at the courthouse. I have watched programs celebrated for ideological alignment rather than measured outcomes while the people in the waiting room went on waiting. Toporek et al. (2009) wisely describe advocacy as a continuum, ranging from empowering the individual client to intervening in systems, and insist that the practitioner must discern which level is actually called for. That discernment requires the humility to distinguish what the client needs from what I believe society needs, and to keep the person in the room above the cause in the culture.

This is also why I have tried to be transparent about my own commitments rather than smuggling them in under a banner of neutrality. The myth of methodological neutrality (Slife et al., 2012) does not protect clients; it conceals from them the worldview actually shaping their care. A profession that names religion and spirituality as dimensions of identity (Ratts et al., 2016) but rarely teaches clinicians how to honor a client's faith (Evans & Nelson, 2021) has not transcended worldview; it has merely hidden one. Honesty about presuppositions, mine included, is the precondition of genuine ethical dialogue (Entwistle, 2015; Moreira-Almeida et al., 2014). The ethical imperative is not to eliminate worldview, which is impossible, but to keep the client's welfare, autonomy, and conscience paramount (ACA, 2014; Collins, 1993).

The great reformers understood this integration. Dr. King's campaign against segregation was structural to its core, for he called segregation not merely unsound but "morally wrong and sinful" (King, 2001), and yet it flowed from a profoundly interior and theological foundation. He refused to let the struggle stoop to violence or hatred and insisted that even oppressed people pursue a redemptive goodwill toward their oppressors (King, 2001). His dream was structural

and personal at once: that his children would be judged by the "content of their character" (King, 2001), and that the children of former slaves and former slaveholders would sit together at one table. Here was advocacy that never lost the person, that pursued the remaking of unjust structures precisely out of an interior conviction about the dignity and equality of every image-bearer. King did not choose between transforming hearts and transforming systems. Neither does shalom.

What It Could Look Like

I have tried to honor the postmodern conscience and to name its limits. Let me end constructively, with what a shalom-shaped justice might actually look like in the rooms where I work.

In the counseling room, it looks like beginning with the person's interior freedom rather than their demographic location: helping clients release resentment through forgiveness (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2015), clarify values that anchor identity in something deeper than shifting social narratives (Hayes et al., 2012), and recover meaning even in suffering (Frankl, 1985), while still helping them understand and navigate the real structural barriers in their lives (Sue et al., 2019). It looks like protecting Rogers's (1957) core conditions of empathy, congruence, and unconditional positive regard, and refusing to reduce any client to oppressor or oppressed (Norcross & Lambert, 2018). The therapeutic relationship is a protected space for healing, not a platform for mobilization.

In civic life, it looks like measuring our justice not by the elegance of our language but by the tangible wellbeing of actual people, asking, of every policy pursued in the name of a group, whether the members of that group are in fact better off, and whether other vulnerable people are being quietly sacrificed to the symbol. It looks like the courage to insist that defending one

marginalized neighbor must never mean abandoning another. The courthouse taught me that a justice indifferent to its own collateral damage is not yet shalom.

In all of it, it looks like restraint born of trust. Restorative justice, in legal scholarship as in Scripture, seeks to repair harm and restore relationship rather than merely to punish (Matthew 18:15–17, NIV; Zehr, 2015). Reconciliation, where it is possible and safe, is the goal, though it can never be coerced, and counselors must exercise judgment where abuse or danger is present (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2015; Volf, 1996). And underneath it all lies a theological humility that the postmodern framework, for all its suspicion, cannot finally supply: the recognition that ultimate justice belongs to God, not to us (Romans 12:19, NIV). This is not passivity. It is the liberation of finite people from the impossible burden of engineering a perfect world, a burden that, when we shoulder it ourselves, has a long history of producing new tyrannies. We are freed instead to do the next faithful thing: to order our own hearts, to serve the person in front of us, and to pursue structural healing without the violence of the absolutist.

Conclusion

The postmodern tradition taught us to be suspicious of comfortable stories, to notice power, and to listen to those the powerful ignore. These are real gifts, and I have received them gratefully. But suspicion cannot build a home, and a justice that sees only structures and categories will, in the end, sacrifice the very persons it set out to defend. I have watched it happen.

Shalom offers more. It is not the enemy of justice but its fulfillment, a wholeness that holds dignity and accountability together, that begins in the reordered heart and reaches outward toward reconciliation, that defends the vulnerable without demonizing anyone because it knows

the fault line of sin runs through us all. It is justice that has learned to love mercy and to walk humbly (Micah 6:8, NIV).

I return, finally, to my son and to the dream of a table where the children of former enemies sit down together (King, 2001). That dream was never merely structural, and it was never merely interior. It was shalom: the whole world set right, person and people and system alike, under the peace of God. I can do no less than work toward it, beginning, as I must, with my own heart.

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