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“Caring about Global Governance for the Sake of Human Flourishing”

David J. Bosch reminded us in his classic tome on mission theology, *Transforming Mission*, that we worship a God whose very act of creation was at the same time the launching of his mission to redeem humanity. We’ve grown accustomed to using the Latin phrase, *Missio Dei*. Bosch wrote, “[i]t is not the church which ‘undertakes’ mission; it is the *missio Dei* which constitutes the church.” Since the Church partakes in the Kingdom of God Jesus came to inaugurate, its mission is holistic, or as Bosch has it, “multifaceted”: it includes “witness, service, justice, healing, reconciliation, liberation, peace, evangelism, fellowship, church planting, contextualization, and much more.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

We all heard Al Tizon this morning, proclaiming the gospel of reconciliation. In his book, *Whole and Reconciled*, Tizon argues that “the Great Commission is the Whole Commission” and that the global church participates “in God’s project to reconcile all things in Christ.” This is a comprehensive project, he argues: “Missionally speaking, these dimensions express themselves in the ministries of (1) evangelism, facilitating reconciliation between God and people; (2) peacemaking, between people and people; (3) stewardship, between God, people and creation.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

A group of New Testament scholars, many of them Pauline scholars, started in 2005 the Forum on Missional Hermeneutics as part of the Society of Biblical Literature. Michael J. Gorman was one of them and his 2015 book, *Becoming the Gospel: Paul, Participation, and Mission*, contends that Paul in his letters to the churches sees these communities as embodying the “justice, peace and joy” of God’s present and coming kingdom. These are signs of that eschatological kingdom; but even more, “they are, like the Spirit, a form of down payment, a guarantee that the age of justice, peace, and joy is not a pipe dream but a future reality that can be known, imperfectly and incompletely but really, in the present. That is what it means for the churches . . . to participate in the *missio dei*.”[[3]](#footnote-3) In other words, working for justice, peace, and human flourishing (joy) is to create a foretaste of the New Heavens and the New Earth to come.

I have no time or space to mention his chapter on “Becoming the Gospel of Peace,” but I will delve briefly into the next one, “Becoming the Justice of God.” The problem in English is that the usual translation of *dikaiosune* (righteousness) makes sense when speaking of “justification by faith.” But it is woefully inadequate to capture its much broader meaning intended by Paul. Gorman quotes N. T. Wright, who, in a chapter he contributed to a 2006 book on justification, contended that “[j]ustification is ultimately about justice, about God putting the world to rights.”[[4]](#footnote-4) In one section, Gorman offers seven connections between justification and justice in Paul’s writings. One of them is “the human condition and injustice.” In Romans 1:18 Paul writes, for instance, “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth” (NRSV). But the word “wickedness” used twice here is better translated as “injustice,” argues Gorman, “understood in the broader sense of the word as the mistreatment of other human beings.”[[5]](#footnote-5) Paul later illustrates what these injustices look like, quoting Psalms, Proverbs, and Isaiah: “Their feet are swift to shed blood; ruin and misery are in their paths, and the way of peace they have not known. There is no fear of God before their eyes” (Rom. 3:15-18 NRSV). This recourse to violence is just as prevalent today as it was in those days. In that perspective, Gorman concludes, “If justification is supposed to repair the human condition, then justification must address injustice, including violence . . . That is, given the human condition, the justification of the unjust will mean both liberation and transformation.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

In his teachings, Jesus mostly quoted from the book of Isaiah. In the first of the Servant Songs, we read that “God’s chosen one … will bring justice to the nations … He will bring justice to all who have been wronged. He will not falter or lose heart until justice prevails throughout the earth” (Is. 42: 1-4 NLT). Already in Chapter 2, we read that in the future reign of Messiah “the nations will stream into Jerusalem … The Lord will mediate between nations and will settle international disputes. They will hammer their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will no longer fight against nation, nor train for war anymore” (Is. 2:4 NLT). This vision is taken up again in the next to last chapter in the Bible, as John sees the nations gather in the New Jerusalem, which has now come down from heaven. “And all the nations will bring their glory and honor into the city” (Rev. 21:24 NLT).

What I am arguing in this presentation is that the global church is called to embody the Good News of Jesus in the present world by anticipating in concrete ways the future reign of the triune God. This entails proclamation of the Good News by word and deed, and a bold and tangible witness to God’s kingdom of “justice, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 14:17). And when it comes to the dimension of justice – caring for “the least of these” – in our 21st century world, we as a global church will need to find ways to impact global governance. As many American Christians came to realize after the killing of George Floyd and other African Americans at the hands of the police in 2020, racism in this country is not just about prejudice. It’s also baked into a system of laws, which is all about governance: from slavery to Jim Crow, from thousands of public lynchings that were never prosecuted to the red-lining of whole city neighborhoods, from tax laws that ensure that areas with a majority of black and brown people have substandard schools to the decrepit state of water infrastructure in cities like Jackson, MI, and much more.

Now zoom out of your own country and take a look at the world. I’ll just mention two issues: peace and climate change. First, a recent article by Matthew Kroenig, an international relations scholar at Georgetown University, published in *Foreign Affairs*, argues that “the United States, Russia, and China are on a collision course.”[[7]](#footnote-7) He ticks off all three major schools in the discipline of international relations – the realists, the liberals, and the constructivists – and from each perspective, what structures or relational dynamics up to a decade ago stood as a bulwark against military conflict have now considerably eroded or even crumbled. One example that realists have put forward as a moderating influence is the ability to know what one’s adversary is capable of. Putin likely miscalculated his chances of victory when he invaded Ukraine. But wars of miscalculation on a larger scale are much more likely today with the advent of new technologies. Many experts are hailing the advent of a “Fourth Industrial Revolution.” As Kroenig has it, “new technologies—such as artificial intelligence, quantum computing and communications, additive manufacturing, robotics, hypersonic missiles, directed energy, and others—promise to transform the global economy, societies, and the battlefield.”[[8]](#footnote-8) Since China is leading in several of these technologies, it might feel emboldened to go on the offensive, for instance, and attack Taiwan. If we are on the threshold of a “new revolution in military affairs,” as some believe to be the case, this makes it much more likely that a great powers conflict is coming.

All this said, Kroenig ends his article on a more optimistic note: much of the world prefers some form of liberal democracy and “2,500 years of theory and history suggest that democracies tend to win these hard-power competitions and autocracies flame out disastrously in the end.” To me, this just seems like too little optimism a bit too late. But, if anything, it is a great argument for all manner of international cooperation and for Christians to support the work of the United Nations with a bit more enthusiasm. I was in New York in 2016 for a two-day conference on Christians in Israel/Palestine organized by the World Evangelical Alliance. Deborah Fikes was their “Permanent Representative to the United Nations.” At one point I asked her why she had taken this position. She answered frankly, “It’s the only game in town.” I’ve heard this again and again from Christians I interviewed who work either within one of the many UN branches or with NGOs that serve in tough parts of the world and witness the work of the UN.

Just a couple of weeks ago I ran across some news that supported Kroenig’s comment about most of the world favoring some type of liberal democratic governance. The International Telecommunications Union (ITU) was founded in 1865 and was the organ that first regulated the use of the Morse Code. Soon after the founding of the United Nations, it became one of its many global bodies. Last year, China and Russia issued a joint statement asking to play a greater role at the ITU and “underscoring their commitment to ‘preserving the right of sovereign states to regulate the national segment of the Internet.’”[[9]](#footnote-9) So here’s the news flash: their candidate in the run-up to the election of a new secretary-general lost badly to the candidate the US and 55 other nations had openly supported. Doreen Bogdan-Martin, a 30-year veteran of the ITU, won with 139 votes out of 172, while Rashid Ismailov won only 25 votes. Bogdan-Martin tweeted, “Ready to lead an ITU that will inspire, include & innovate, so that everyone, everywhere can harness the power of #digital to transform their lives.” At least as an ideal, this is regulation aimed at human flourishing.

The second great challenge I wanted to highlight is that of environmental protection and climate change mitigation. At this point, allow me to introduce the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals (or SDGs) for those who may not be familiar with them. They were developed on the basis of the 2000-2015 Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which already had been very successful – lifting over a billion people out of extreme poverty. But after much study, the international consensus was that the eight MDGs were not comprehensive enough. Their successors, therefore, the SDGs, more than doubled in number (17 in all), including “clean water and sanitation,” “affordable and clean energy,” “sustainable cities and communities,” and a few others. But they also include goals targeting good governance, like “gender equality,” “industry, innovation and infrastructure,” “reduced inequalities,” “climate action,” “peace, justice and strong institutions,” and finally, SDG 17, “partnerships for the goals.”

By the way, one of the sub-goals (they call them “targets”) of SDG 16 (“Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions”) reads, “Ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms, in accordance with national legislation and international agreements.” This is exactly the agenda of the newly elected head of the ITU – ensuring public access everywhere to public information. As you know, this is essential for democratic and fair elections, among other social goods.

Now for a quick look at SDG 13: “Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts.” On the UN page for this SDG, we read that “Climate change is humanity’s ‘code red’ warning.” Just by the target date of 2030, already two ominous milestones will have been reached: a) drought is estimated to displace 700 million; b) medium- to large-scale disasters will increase 40% from 2015 to 2030.”

I had the privilege of interviewing arguably the most respected scholar on the G7 and the G20 this July. John Kirton is the founder-director of the G7 and the G20 Research Groups based at the Munk School of Global Affairs at the University of Toronto. John is also a committed Christian. He has published several edited books with a Russian colleague, Marina Larionova, and when I asked him about how his Russian scholar friends were faring, he answered,

“They’re fine. Of course, with the war in Ukraine they have to be careful, but look, we cannot solve this world’s problems unless we all work together. The war with Ukraine will be over at some point. We need the Russians to solve the climate crisis. We also need the Russians’ cooperation to manage the Arctic region that is melting so fast.”[[10]](#footnote-10)

John Kirton loves this work he’s been doing – monitoring these multilateral forums and holding member states accountable for the pledges they make publicly every year since the late 1980s. But he also sees this as a way to contribute to the lubrication and protection of global institutions that at least reduce the risk of international conflicts. He also told me this is important to him as a follower of Jesus.

So, what do I mean by “global governance”? John Kirton is the editor of a book series for Routledge intitled “Global Governance.” I am relying on his 2018 book co-edited with Maria Larionova, *Accountability for Effectiveness in Global Governance*, to answer this question.[[11]](#footnote-11) There are three broad levels of governance at work here. The highest is leaders-level summitry, that is, the plurilateral summit institutions (or PSIs) such as the G7 (1975), the G20 (2008), BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa; since 2009). And finally, on this highest level we have the various UN summits, including those on sustainable development and on climate change. Below this level, we find “the vast array of long-established intergovernmental organizations that are broadly multilateral like the World Bank or regional like the European Union (EU), the Organization of American States (OAS) and the African Union (AU).”[[12]](#footnote-12) Finally, at a lower level – but just as important in the overall scheme of enhancing the quality of life for all – are the many NGOs, including the business sector, and the wide variety of civil society organizations that seek to impact human flourishing in a positive way.

Now I want to talk about some of the other people I’ve interviewed so far. How do other Christian brothers and sisters see their participation in global governance – however small or large – in a missional light? Earlier, I mentioned Deborah Fikes who was representing the World Evangelical Alliance (or the WEA) at the United Nations in New York. Allow me to open a brief parenthesis for those not familiar with the WEA, which has its roots in the Second Great Awakening in the British Isles. Originally founded in 1846 as Britain’s Evangelical Alliance, it soon became the World Evangelical Alliance. Today it represents 600 million evangelicals worldwide in 143 national alliances and nine regional ones. In the early 2000s, it opened an office in Geneva, Switzerland, in order to interact with the United Nations, and especially the Human Rights Council. This is important, not just for churches that struggle with persecution in various nations, but also for evangelicals to get involved in many causes that impact human flourishing around the world, from peacebuilding, to religious freedom, to climate change mitigation, to justice issues like minority rights and civil rights more generally, slavery and human trafficking.

Deborah Fikes, who introduced me to several contacts for this research, is a good example of a Christian investing in global governance. She oversaw the Midland, Texas ministerial Alliance under the George W. Bush administration and was personally involved in peace negotiations between South and North Sudan. She has been a vocal member of the Climate Group and a member of the National Climate Ethics Campaign Coalition. She is also co-president of Religions for Peace, the world’s largest interfaith coalition with offices in New York and on the board of directors of Arms Control Association located in Washington, DC.

Deborah Fikes introduced me to her Canadian colleague, Christine MacMillan, who after many years of service in the Salvation Army was sent to New York as the founder and director of their International Social Justice Commission. She is also the director (“Chairperson”) of the evangelical network that many of you will recognize, Micah Global. She told me that she deliberately chose a locale in New York City that was very close to the UN. This is because several years before that, she had been appointed as the WEA’s Chair of the Human Trafficking Task Force and was coordinating efforts with the relevant U.N. bodies and conventions. Also, from 2014 to 2018 MacMillan joined the WEA’s senior leadership team coordinating its public engagement work, which included leading its various teams working in UN circles in New York and Geneva.[[13]](#footnote-13)

MacMillan recently contributed to an edited academic book on the UN’s rather recent turn to work more intentionally with religious institutions worldwide (*Religious Soft Diplomacy and the United Nations: Religious Engagement as Loyal Opposition*).[[14]](#footnote-14) Her chapter is entitled, “Evangelicals Securing a Seat at the Table.”[[15]](#footnote-15) In it she explains the relationship between the WEA and the UN:

The WEA holds Special Consultation Status in the Economic and Social Council of the UN (ECOSOC) which serves as the central forum for discussing international economic and social issues and formulating policy recommendations addressed to member states and the United Nations system. The WEA UN Team is a group whose mandate oversees the WEA’s contribution within the UN by offering concrete proposals, while also serving as the liaison body between the UN and WEA’s Networks, Global Partners, Regional and National Alliances, on behalf of the world’s most vulnerable and marginalized communities.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Evangelicals bring to the UN network a huge pool of NGOs, people with experience and expertise in many areas, as well as potentially greater popular acceptance of UN newer programs. Evangelicals, in turn, benefit from the UN’s expertise and deep pockets. But this relationship can also be challenging. As MacMillan, puts it, love of neighbor for some evangelicals might mean only “evangelical neighbors.” Justice work applies to all who suffer, no matter their religious affiliation. Therefore, an element of self-criticism is essential. In her words, “Having a place at the ECOSOC table both provides us with the opportunity for self-expression, while implicitly requiring evangelical Christians to engage in a reciprocal self-critical process.”[[17]](#footnote-17)

The WEA is also focused on the younger generation, that tends to be very justice-minded. It has over one hundred interns in its UN internship program in New York and Geneva. MacMillan explains,

Our WEA UN Internship Program has provided opportunity for students at evangelical institutions such as Nyack College, Wheaton College, the King’s College and Olivet University and beyond, including Yale University, to actively experience the UN. We have established interns who hold UN passes, attend events, and write reports with a credit on offer.[[18]](#footnote-18)

In my interview with Christine MacMillan this past January, I asked her about the SDGs. She expressed admiration for their comprehensiveness. At one point she said, “Not one goal only, but a number of goals are needed to create this cohesiveness . . . Life is not made of one issue. Our personhood needs a number of things to make this sustainable. Only then can we thrive or flourish.”[[19]](#footnote-19)

I’m running out of time, but allow me to give you a sample of some of the other interviews I have conducted (and I am not finished):

* Mijito Vinito is an Indian diplomat in his forties from north India. His tribal village was evangelized by missionaries so he’s third generation Christian. He is first secretary for the Permanent Mission of India to the UN, directing their work at the Security Council. He will be stationed elsewhere in the coming year. His highlight in NYC is meeting other Christians through CRU’s “Embassy” or ministry to the UN. Being able to discuss geopolitical issues with a Christian brother or sister of another nation is refreshing. As believers, we are first of all citizens of the Kingdom of God, and only secondarily of our nation-state.
* Caleb Benadum is an American lawyer around 30 years old living with his wife in Geneva, Switzerland. He and his wife have a passion for refugee resettlement and have done so in the US. He has now worked over three years for the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, a UN agency with a staff of over 60,000 in 160 countries. He does legal research work, assessing whether so-and-so can go back safely to this or that country. His wife works for a secular Swiss NGO there.
* Godfred Paul is an Indian man in his sixties. He has worked for the British secular NGO HelpAge for 35 years in 13 different nations, mostly in Asia. For the last 5 years, he has directed its office in Myanmar. This is the only large NGO that focuses on the needs of the elderly, which are often dire in the developing world. He believes that the SDGs are a powerful tool to increase human flourishing, as long as NGOs work closely with the UN and local governments. He told stories of how his personal faith in Christ was not just a resource to navigate difficult interpersonal tensions as office director but also to help train a staff to be more harmonious and productive. He also has had many opportunities to share his faith in a very natural way.

To conclude, I firmly believe that the global church should consider grooming many of its promising young people to seek careers in the many levels of global governance.

1. *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), p. 512. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. F. Albert Tizon, *Whole & Reconciled*, Foreword by Ruth Padilla DeBorst, Afterword by Ronald J. Sider (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018, p. 174. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Michael J. Gorman, Becoming the Gospel: Paul, Participation, and Mission (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), p. 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. N. T. Wright, “New Perspectives on Paul,” in *Justification in Perspective: Historical Developments and Contemporary Challenges*, ed. Bruce L. McCormack (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), pp. 243-64, at p. 264; quoted in Gorman, *Becoming the Gospel*, p. 221. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Gorman, *Becoming the Gospel*, p. 224. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid., p. 225. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Matthew Kroenig, “International Relations Theory Suggests Great-Power War Is Coming,” *Foreign Affairs* (Aug. 27, 2022), online, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/08/27/international-relations-theory-suggests-great-power-war-is-coming/?tpcc=recirc_latest062921> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Brian Fung, “US defeats Russia in a battle to control the future of the global internet,” *CNN Business* (Sept. 29, 2022), online, <https://www.cnn.com/2022/09/29/tech/us-russia-internet-future/index.html>. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Personal interview with John Kirton, July 25, 2022. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. John J. Kirton and Maria Larionova, eds., *Accountability for Effectiveness in Global Governance* (London and New York: Routledge, 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. John J. Kirton and Maria Larionova, “Accountability and effectiveness in global governance” (Ch. 1) in *Accountability for Effectiveness in Global Governance,* John J. Kirton and Maria Larionova, eds., pp. 3-22, at p. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. World Evangelical Alliance News, “Comm. Chistine MacMillan Retires from WEA Senior Leadership to Focus on Human Trafficking and Social Justice Work,” (June 30, 2018), online, <https://worldea.org/news/15071/comm-christine-macmillan-retires-from-wea-senior-leadership-to-focus-on-human-trafficking-and-social-justice-work/>. The news brief explains some of her responsibilities, “Also part of her department have been networks focused on creation care, disaster management, humanitarian advocacy, peace & reconciliation, refugees, and human trafficking, among others.” [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Sherie M. Steiner, and James T. Christie, eds., *Religious Soft Diplomacy and the United Nations: Religious Engagement as Loyal Opposition* (Lanham, MD, and London: Lexington Books, 2021). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Christine MacMillan, “Evangelicals Securing a Seat at the UN Table,” in *Religious Soft Diplomacy,* pp. 279-95. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid., p. 280. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Ibid., p. 284. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Ibid., p. 289. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Christine MacMillan, personal interview, Jan. 17, 2022. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)