

## ASJ and Its Staff Seek to Act in a Way that Is a Testimony to Jesus

Dear Nick,

You bring up a very important point, namely, our identity as a Christian organization. ASJ works on issues like governance, anti-corruption, and violence—areas that few Christian organizations tackle. So we regularly receive questions about what influence, if any, our Christian identity plays in our work. What exactly do we mean when we say that ASJ is a Christian organization? If you scrubbed the Bible verses from our webpage or skipped our all-staff devotional meetings, would anything else set us apart? But you are right: since the beginning, our vision has been bringing about God’s desire for shalom in Honduras.

Transparency International (TI) is the world’s leading anti-corruption organization. In 2012, they invited us to join their network of anti-corruption organizations; we were officially accredited as a National TI Chapter in 2015. Recently, TI’s president José Ugaz visited us, and told us that out of TI’s more than one hundred chapters, ASJ was one of the three “star” chapters he held up as an example of positive anti-corruption work around the world.

Few of TI’s national chapters are Christian organizations. Some people in the TI network cite our Christian commitment as an explanation for our good work. As Christians, they say, we must be motivated by higher goals, making us bolder in speaking out in unpopular or controversial ways.

I have heard this said by Christian speakers and authors as well—that Christian organizations can be identified by the superior quality

of their work. People suggest, by way of explanation, that Christian organizations care more, love deeper, and may even see God intervening on their behalf to ensure that their initiatives prosper.

This would be a neat explanation, but unfortunately, it doesn't ring true to me. It implies that non-faith-based organizations will always be worse than Christian organizations—either because they love less, or because they are motivated by earthly or material motivations. This has not been my experience. What's more, over my years in this work I have come in contact with many Christian organizations doing very mediocre work, or worse, caught up in severe problems of corruption or sexual abuse. Christian principles don't always line up neatly with excellence or success.

I believe in the theological concept of common grace—the idea that God's blessing has been extended to all creation, and that God's good works can be carried out by anyone who is trying to love and be a blessing to others. Christians have no monopoly on helping others. I would argue that God is working today through organizations like Transparency International, Amnesty International, and other secular organizations that are fighting injustice around the world, despite the fact that these organizations do not consider themselves Christian, or their work to be Christian work.

Another way to examine ASJ's Christian identity would be to ask whether we evangelize or proselytize; do we use ASJ as a platform to spread Christianity? Here we enter into stickier territory. Non-Christians may like what we are doing with our anti-corruption or violence prevention programs, but be uncomfortable with the promotion of a particular religion. A focus on evangelism can raise difficult questions for Christians working in these programs.

Some Christian organizations offer benefits only to Christians, while others serve everyone but require beneficiaries to listen to a Christian message or receive Christian materials before being served. Still others offer Christian messages or materials that are optional. What is the "appropriate" level of proselytization when meeting individuals' material needs? Both as individual Christians and as leaders of a Christian organization, how should we relate the "mission" of a Christian organization as that is generally conceptual-

ized in Christian circles (converting non-Christians to Christianity), and our organization's specific mission, which is to make Honduran government systems work more justly and does not explicitly include religious conversion?

As we at ASJ have reflected on this question, we have arrived at two goals that respond to the question above, and to the broader question about what sets us apart as a Christian organization.

First, we do see our work as directly Christian, kingdom work. Context here is important. Honduras is between 80 to 90 percent Christian, with a higher rate of church attendance than the United States. Evidence of Christianity is everywhere here, in schools, in political speeches, in graffiti on city walls and bumper stickers on public buses. The problem in Honduras is not that people have not heard of Jesus, but that they may have seen his name abused or misrepresented.

Therefore, personally and through ASJ, we seek to live our lives in a way that is a testimony to how Jesus truly lived. We want to be brave, to stand up for victims and the oppressed, and defend their rights. This model of living is attractive to people who have felt that their desire for justice was ignored by the church, or incompatible with life in the church. In multiple cases, our example has invited people to further explore what it means to be a Christian, and to see God in a new way.

When I arrived in Honduras over thirty years ago, the country was around 95 percent Catholic, with Protestants a small minority. Since then, the Protestant church has exploded, and the most recent surveys show that the current breakdown is closer to 45 percent Catholic and 45 percent Protestant, with around 10 percent claiming no religious affiliation. Despite this surge of conversions, the country still suffers from widespread corruption, income inequality, and a homicide rate that is far too high. How is this possible?

It's certainly not just a problem of the "faithless" 10 percent. Political elites attend church services on Sunday then pass a law on Monday that makes it nearly impossible to investigate corruption cases. We have even heard of pastors who accept money from drug traffickers for the purpose of building a new church, or who look the

other way while drugs are stashed in the church's storeroom. Clearly, there is a disconnect between their talk and their walk.

The second aspect of our evangelism, then, is "evangelizing" those who already consider themselves to be Christians. If you look at the life of Jesus, the apostles, and the prophets, they were consistently at odds with the religious status quo. Prophets were often the lone voices daring to speak out against oppressive kings and leaders. From Moses to Nathan to Elijah to Isaiah, we see God's messengers standing up to power in defense of those who have been marginalized or oppressed. Jesus continued and perfected the tradition that came before him. He publicly challenged corrupt church leaders, overturned tables in the temple, and taught subversive messages that denounced oppressive Roman authorities while also defusing desire for a violent insurrection.

Despite all this, if you poll the average person on the street asking them which words they would use to describe Christians, almost no one would say "brave," and few would describe Christians as being on the front lines of defending those who have been oppressed. Christians are comfortable modeling Jesus' humility, compassion, and love. Why have we strayed from modeling his bravery and zeal for justice?

At ASJ, we want to evangelize the church to reclaim this aspect of their faith and to live it out, to be brave Christians focused on protecting the poor and marginalized. Therefore, at ASJ we consistently and publicly claim our Christian identity, while also unmasking corruption, working in violent and dangerous neighborhoods, and denouncing government and pressuring it to do what's right for its people. These are very high-risk, uncommon Christian pursuits. This public claiming of our faith, backed up by bold work, allows us to witness both to Christians and non-Christians, modeling an active faith that is concerned not only with people's eternal souls but also with their earthly flourishing or shalom.

Last year, we started the Brave Christians program I mentioned in letter 22. Brave Christians is staffed by church leaders who are concerned about injustice in their country, in part, a result of our years of efforts to be more intentional about challenging the way that Hon-

duran Christians and churches live out their faith. Brave Christians leads Christians in prayer for broken government systems and for injustices from the family to the national level, while also informing them and encouraging them to join advocacy movements to address the issues they are praying over.

Through this movement, we are bringing into conversation those who are more comfortable in prayer with those who are more comfortable using their hands, voice, and power to denounce injustices—I think to the benefit of both groups. As we pray and work together, we remember in humility that it is through God’s grace that we are able to do this work. This motivation, purpose, and focus is how I would define ASJ’s Christian identity.

*Your friend,*  
Kurt

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## ASJ Enacts Fundamental Themes in Christian Scripture

Dear Kurt,

Thanks for answering the question I posed to you as to the way in which ASJ is a *Christian* organization. Over the years I have learned that a good many evangelical organizations doing relief or development work, when asked this question, point to the fact that the staff assembles on a regular basis for prayer and devotions and engages in various forms of evangelistic activity. That is not what you pointed to. Your staff does in fact assemble on a regular basis for prayer and devotions. I know, because I have been present at some of those assemblies; my wife, Claire, has, on occasion, led them. But that's not what you point to. You point to the fact that the way in which ASJ and its staff *conduct themselves* has an "evangelizing" or "witnessing" function. "We seek," you say, "to live our lives in a way that is a testimony to how Jesus lived. We want to be brave, to stand up for victims and the oppressed, and defend their rights." You observe that this is a witness both to those outside the church "who have felt that their desire for justice was ignored by the church, or incompatible with life in the church," and to those inside the church who assume that Christianity is only about "people's eternal souls" and not about "their earthly well-being."

Let me take this discussion about ASJ as a Christian organization a bit further. I would say that, in addition to the witnessing function you point to, ASJ is a Christian organization by virtue of intentionally enacting some fundamental themes of Christian (and Hebrew) Scripture. Let me identify three of those themes, in each case taking

a bit of time to establish that the theme is indeed fundamental in Scripture.

Social justice, the sort of justice that is the primary concern of ASJ, is one of those fundamental themes. In Isaiah 61:8 we read, "I, the LORD, love justice." In Psalm 37:28 we read, "The LORD loves justice." These are just two of dozens of passages, perhaps hundreds, that declare that God loves justice.

To understand what Scripture is saying, when it declares that God loves justice, we must keep in mind the distinction I drew in previous letters between first-order and second-order justice. If one thinks of second-order criminal justice when one reads that God loves justice, one will assume that what the biblical writers mean, when they say that God loves justice, is that God loves the imposition of punishment on those who "offend against God's holy laws."

I submit that if one pays attention to context, it becomes clear that when Scripture declares that God loves justice, almost always the sort of justice in view is first-order justice. God also loves a well-functioning criminal justice system, the reason being that first-order justice in our world is constantly under threat in the absence of a well-functioning criminal justice system. But criminal justice is *for the sake* of first-order justice; it's not for its own sake. First-order justice is basic.

One form that God's love of justice takes is that God calls you and me, and all our fellow human beings, to love and seek justice. We are called to participate in God's cause of loving and doing justice. In a well-known passage from the Old Testament book of Amos (5:24) God says, "Let justice roll down like waters, and right-doing like an ever-flowing stream." And in an equally well-known passage from the Old Testament book of Micah (6:8), the prophet says,

God has told you, O mortal, what is good;  
and what does the LORD require of you  
but to do justice, to love kindness,  
and to walk humbly with your God.

Just as I could quote many more passages than the two quoted above, in which we read that God loves justice, so too I could quote

many more than these two in which we read that God enjoins human beings to love and seek justice.

In its pursuit of social justice, ASJ is enacting the biblical theme that God loves justice and enjoins us to participate in God's work of loving and pursuing justice.

From the words and deeds of ASJ we learn that, in its struggle for social justice in Honduras, it gives priority to the fate of the little ones, the marginalized, the downtrodden. People of wealth and power are also sometimes the victims of social injustice. But as you wrote in one of your previous letters, ASJ wants "to stand up for the victims and the oppressed, and defend their rights." I submit that, in giving priority to the fate of "the victims and the oppressed," ASJ is enacting a second fundamental theme in Christian Scripture.

A striking feature of what Scripture says about justice is that, over and over, the presence or absence of justice in society is connected to the fate of the widows, the orphans, the aliens, and the impoverished. Here is Isaiah speaking:

Seek justice,  
rescue the oppressed,  
defend the orphan,  
plead for the widow. (1:17)

A few chapters later we read:

Woe to those who decree iniquitous decrees,  
and the writers who keep writing oppression,  
to turn aside the needy from justice  
and to rob the poor of my people of their right,  
that widows may be their spoil,  
and that they may make the fatherless their prey.

(10:1-2)

From the dozens of passages I could cite in which the same point is made, let me add just one more, this one from the Psalms:

Give justice to the weak and the orphan;  
maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute.  
Rescue the weak and the needy;  
deliver them from the hand of the wicked. (82: 3-4)

The connection that the biblical writers draw between justice and injustice, on the one hand, and the fate of the widows, the orphans, the aliens, and the impoverished, on the other hand, is so unusual and striking that one is bound to ask, what does it mean? How are we to understand it?

A commonplace among the South American liberation theologians who were writing in the 1960s and 1970s was that what is coming to expression here is what they called God's "preferential option for the poor." This suggestion infuriated a good many well-to-do North American Christians. "What do you mean, God's preferential option for the poor? Doesn't God love everybody equally, rich and poor alike? You don't have to be poor to be loved by God."

My response is: true, God does love one and all. Nonetheless, there's no getting around the fact that when the biblical writers declare that God loves justice and enjoins us to do so as well, over and over the widows, the orphans, the aliens, and the impoverished are mentioned.

Once again, why? Why this persistent emphasis on what one might call "the quartet of the vulnerable"? Let me offer a suggestion.

When we work for social justice, we have to set priorities. Powerful and wealthy people do on occasion get mugged, burglarized, and so forth. They too are the victims of injustice—the victims of *episodes* of injustice. But compare their situation to that of the widows, the orphans, the aliens, and the impoverished in old Israel. These were the vulnerable ones; they had no power or wealth. Their *daily condition* was a condition of injustice and of threats of injustice. Yes, they too would have suffered *episodes* of injustice: muggings, for example. But they were vulnerable to *the condition of their daily existence* being unjust.

If we are seeking social justice, we have to deal with those who are victims of *episodes* of injustice. But our priority has to be those whose *daily condition* is unjust. That's why there is, in Scripture, a preferential

option for the quartet of the vulnerable. In its work, ASJ enacts this fundamental theme of Scripture.

There is a third theme in Christian scripture that ASJ seeks to enact. As I have remarked several times in these letters, what struck me on my first visit to ASJ, and again on all my subsequent visits, is the implicit assumption in everything it does that it is the task of the Honduran government to secure justice in Honduras. And as I argued in an earlier letter (#5) this is exactly what Christian Scripture says is the task of government in general.

In the way it works for social justice in Honduras, ASJ enacts the biblical theme, that it is the God-given task of government to secure justice in society. ASJ does not content itself with dispensing aid and charity to victims of injustice. Nor does it content itself with issuing denunciations of injustice. Neither does it try to do an end run around government. It holds government officials responsible for securing justice, and it aids them in doing so.

ASJ is a Christian organization in the way that you emphasize, Kurt, namely, by the organization and its staff conducting themselves as a “testimony to how Jesus lived,” a testimony both to those within the church and to those outside. But it is also a Christian organization in the way that I have highlighted in this letter: it seeks to enact—to actualize—some fundamental themes in Christian Scripture.

*Your friend,*  
Nick