The Storied Power of Grace for Hillbillies: Teaching the Doctrine of Justification by Grace, Narratively

Abstract

With the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States in 2016, racial crimes have skyrocketed, especially among the white working class against the non-white and immigrants. Therefore, this paper begins by asking the following question: what lies behind such upsurge of hatred? More specifically, what are some of the shared narratives that spurred the white working class to not only brew, but also to act upon such rage against the non-white and immigrants? Drawing upon the work of the sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild, Strangers in Their Own Land, I analyze the rage and anger of the white working class through hearing their stories, not only to examine the veracity of their claims, but also to empathize their situations and propose a new way forward. Afterwards, I attempt to re-contextualize the doctrine of justification by grace through faith as a powerful resource for re-storying the white-working class’ understandings of reality. Even when the doctrine has been hardly utilized as the source of racial healing and reconciliation, I draw upon Elsa Tamez, Miroslav Volf, James K. A. Smith, and Perry Yoder to shed light on the enormous potential of the doctrine as a sort of narrative to bring shalom to the conflicts between the white working class and the non-white and immigrants in this country.

Posing the Question: The Great Paradox in the Southern White Working Class

The election of President Donald Trump in 2016 marks a watershed moment in many ways, one of which is the skyrocketing tension over racial issues. In the past couple of years, before Trump’s presidential election, tragedies such as the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson in 2014, the Charleston church shooting by Dylann S. Roof in 2015 began to take place with more frequency. \(^1\) After the presidential election, the year 2017 saw the car attack against the Charlottesville anti-racist rally, resulted in the tragic death of a woman. \(^2\) In response to this series of heinous attacks against human dignity, inundated are books and other types of media as to how Americans should handle the potentially explosive issue of racism. As variegated as all these media are, their approaches to the issue of racism are as varied as can be. Simply by looking at a best-selling book chart such as Amazon Charts, one can get a sense of how different

approaches are employed in order to get to the heart of the matter. Among them are a personal memoir (J.D. Vance’s *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of Family and Culture in Crisis*), a historical analysis looking forward to the future (Jon Meacham’s *The Soul of America: The Battle for Our Better Angels*), and a political commentary on the Trump presidency (Bob Woodward’s *Fear: Trump in the White House*). In one way or the other they are all dealing with the issue of white normativity and racism. While each of these approaches has its respective advantages and disadvantages, in this paper I set out to uncover the shared narratives of the white working class that has led them to the recent expressions of rage against the non-whites and immigrants. Such task is immensely important for my theological analysis on the doctrine of justification, for no theological analysis could be fruitful for the flourishing of humanity unless it is grounded in the relatively accurate understandings of reality. It is commonly agreed among theologians that ethnographic work provides for such understandings of reality.3

Thus, of many perspectives and genres, I engage with the work of ethnography, particularly the Berkeley sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild’s *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right*.4 In this work, Hochschild focuses on the politically right-leaning group called the Tea Party. Her primary concern in conducting this research is amply attested to in numerous statistical records over the ever-growing chasm between the political left and the right. “In 1960s, when a survey asked American adults whether it would “disturb” them if their child married a member of the other political party, no more than 5 percent of either party answered “yes.” But in 2010, 33 percent of Democrats and 40 percent of Republicans answered “yes.””5 Interestingly enough, through her research she has found out that this ideological conflicts happen along the fault line of race, as the rage comes from the Southern white working class against the non-whites and immigrants.6 As a sociologist at UC Berkeley, arguably the center of American progressive politics, Hochschild openly acknowledges that there is an empathy wall blocking between her and the Tea Party members in this regard. Her puzzlement toward them began with what she calls the great paradox, well explained in the following.

Many Tea Party advocates work in or run small businesses. Yet the politicians they support back laws that consolidate the monopoly power of the very largest companies that are poised to swallow up smaller ones. Small farmers voting with Monsanto? Corner drugstore owners voting with Walmart? The local bookstore owner voting with

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5 Ibid., 146. “The deep story of the right, the feels-as-if story, corresponds to a real structural squeeze. People want to achieve the American dream, but for a mixture of reasons feel they are being held back, and this leads people of the right to feel frustrated, angry, and betrayed by the government. Race is an essential part of this story.”
Amazon? If I were a small business owner, I would welcome lower company taxes, sure, but strengthening the monopolies that could force me out of business? I didn’t get it. Such great paradox does not stop at welcoming conglomerates that might hurt their own businesses. Their favorable attitudes toward big businesses are immediately translated into hostility toward federal government. They see a stark contrast between businesses and the federal government, tantamount to the battle between good and evil. In fact, Hochschild observes that not receiving federal government’s money in whatsoever type of aid or loan operates as a litmus test for honorable status among the Tea Party members. Why is this? What kind of narratives do these Southern, white working class share, which the progressives like Hochschild in the coastal urban areas such as San Francisco or Boston do not see?

Such is the driving force behind Hochschild’s research, and for her 5-year period research she has “accumulated 4,690 pages of transcripts based on interviews with a core of forty Tea Party advocates and twenty others from various walks of life—teachers, social workers, lawyers, and government officials.” What Hochschild has in mind here is to remove the empathy wall between her and the Tea Party members. Instead of blindly critiquing the Southern white working class as responsible for all the tragedies mentioned in the foregoing, Hochschild says, “if I could truly enter the minds and hearts of people on the far right on the issue of the water they drink, the animals they hunt, the lakes they swim in, the streams they fish in, the air they breathe, I could get to know them up close.” In other words, Hochschild is trying to listen to their stories without passing any prejudgment toward them. This is important for the following theological task of mine in two respects. First, it resembles the spirit of empathic love in Jesus’ Incarnation. Hochschild is trying to put herself in the shoes of their lives, which could serve as a great pathway to more empathic understanding toward any person or group. Second, given that this paper contemplates how to teach the Tea Party members God’s justifying grace as a remedy for their problem, which I will describe in more detail below, listening to their stories is a necessary step. In this light, I will jump right into the stories of the White working class with the aid of Hochschild’s ethnographic research below.

Getting at the Core of the Issue: Deep Story and the Lost Honor (Shame) of the White Working Class

To get to the heart of the issue Hochschild is determined to find out the deep story of the white working class. What is deep story? It is a story behind the superficial telling of someone’s story. It is a story of justifying and defending one’s current ways of life, which “feels-as-if” true. Hochschild’s own definition of what deep story is is worthwhile a fuller quote here.

7 Ibid., 10.
8 Ibid., 114.
9 Ibid., 18. Also, see Appendix A in Strangers in Their Own Land, in which Hochschild gives a detailed description of her research methodology. Overall, she is adopting an ethnographic research method that is “exploratory” or “hypothesis generating.”
10 Ibid. 21.
It’s the story feelings tell, in the language of symbols. It removes judgment. It removes fact. It tells us how things feel. Such a story permits those on both sides of the political spectrum to stand back and explore the subjective prism through which the party on the other side sees the world. And I don’t believe we understand anyone’s politics, right or left, without it. For we all have a deep story.\textsuperscript{11}

Having defined deep story like this, Hochschild weaves many stories of her interviewees into a shared narrative, that is, a shared deep story of the white working class. According to Hochschild, there are three important constituents of this deep story of theirs: a failed (or delayed) American dream, non-whites and immigrants as line cutters, and a sense of betrayal by the federal government. Below I will give a detailed description of each of them, one by one.

First, a failed (or delayed) American Dream is the initiating factor here. Hochschild puts it that “the American Dream is a dream of progress—the idea that you’re better off than your forebears just as they superseded their parents before you—and extends beyond money and stuff.”\textsuperscript{12} Thus, the natural expectation is that as long as they put into enough effort, at least as much as that of their parents’ generation, then there will be progress. However, as is well known, the situation did not go as they expected: “You’ve suffered long hours, layoffs, and exposure to dangerous chemicals at work, and received reduced pensions. You have shown moral character through trial by fire, and the American Dream of prosperity and security is a reward for all of this, showing who you have been and are—a badge of honor.”\textsuperscript{13} In fact, the economist and policy scholar Robert Reich explains in his documentary movie \textit{Inequality for All}, that back in 1978 an average white working class male used to earn $48,000 while the top 1\% made $393,000. Fast forward the clock, in 2010 an average white working class male earns $33,000, while the top 1\% makes over a million dollars.\textsuperscript{14} Through the expressions of frustration and feelings of hopelessness, this statistical record is verified over and over again in Hochschild’s interviews.

Second, it is in this situation that the white working class began to see the non-whites and immigrants as those cutting in line. What needs to be noted is that back in the past the white working class used to perceive the non-whites and immigrants as standing behind them in line. However, as the failed American Dream and all its offshoots show, it is no longer the case. Hochschild’s description of what goes on inside the minds of the typical white working class goes like this.

As they cut in, it feels like you are being moved back. How can they just do that? Who are they? Some are black. Through affirmative action plans, pushed by the federal government, they are being given preference for places in colleges and universities, apprenticeships, jobs, welfare payments, and free lunches… Blacks, women, immigrants, refugees, brown pelicans—all have cut ahead of you in line. But it’s people like you who

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 135.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 136.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{14} Robert Reich, \textit{Inequality for All}
have made this country great. You feel uneasy. It has to be said: the line cutters irritate you. They are violating rules of fairness.”

Last, because of the foregoing, they now feel betrayed by the government. “Then you become suspicious. If people are cutting in line ahead of you, someone must be helping them. Who?” It is not hard to guess that in their minds this someone who must be helping them is the federal government. Thus, “you feel betrayed. The president is their president, not your president. Now you have your guard way up. Watch out for lies.”

Note that this might be far from accurate facts and correct judgment, for that is what a deep story does. Living out such a deep story must provoke in them depression and sympathy toward their own circumstances, and anger toward those who caused it. So the puzzlement of Hochschild, let alone so many who do not live among the white working class begin to make sense. It is in this light that I approach the issue of teaching God’s justifying grace for them. However, one thing that lies behind such a deep story is the sense of lost honor, or the sense of shame in them. All throughout her book, Hochschild makes it quite clear that keeping and cultivating honor is an important part of who they are for the white working class in the South, and it is her analysis that the deep story that was just rehearsed had taken from them their due honor. At least, that is how they felt about living the deep story of theirs.

“Crazy redneck.” “White trash.” “Ignorant Southern Bible-thumper.” You realize that’s you they’re talking about. You hear these terms on the radio, on television, read them on blogs. The gall. You’re offended. You’re angry… You are a stranger in your own land. You do not recognize yourself in how others see you. It is a struggle to feel seen and honored. And to feel honored you have to feel—and feel seen as—moving forward. But through no fault of your own, and in ways that are hidden, you are slipping backward.

So they feel helpless, yet they are desperate to find a way out of this endless maze. “You feel stuck between a strong desire to be recognized for who you really are and all you’ve really done, and dread at joining the parad of “poor me’s.” You want to rise up against these downward forces. There is a political movement made up of people such as yourself who share your deep story. It’s called the Tea Party.”

In the remainder of this paper, then, I will show how God’s justifying grace could be a much better alternative to the Tea Party and its hatred toward the non-whites and immigrants. In the end, I close the paper with some pedagogical suggestions for teaching this grace of God in a way that leads the white working class to retell their deep story. The deep story that does not bash the non-whites and immigrants, but lets them see the facts and makes accurate judgments on what they are caught up in.

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15 Ibid., 137.  
16 Ibid., 139.  
17 Ibid., 140.  
18 Ibid., 144.  
19 Ibid., 145.
Re-reading the Deep Story of the Southern White Working Class through God’s Justifying Grace: A Deep Story for Recovering Honor

According to Hochschild, as I shared above, the white working class generally feels betrayed by the government and cut-in by the non-white and immigrants. In place of the narrative that provokes rage against the non-white and immigrants, the white working class needs an alternative narrative for racial reconciliation, and I argue that the doctrine of justification by grace through faith, as a narrative of God’s recognizing the human worth of every person, has powerful potential to achieve the hoped-for reconciliation, precisely because of the power of God’s grace as a free gift of recognizing each and every human person’s worth.

I begin with this question. What does it mean that God’s justifying grace in the doctrine of justification by grace through faith is able to restore the lost honor of the white working class? The key to responding to this question hangs on God’s justifying acts redefining the human relationship with God and with one another. One of the significant consequences of such redefined relationship is, I argue, resilience to the messages of lost honor (shame) prevalent among the white working class. Before proceeding to my arguments, it should be noted that dealing with the whole debates surrounding the doctrine of justification goes beyond the purpose of this paper, which might be, at any rate, an overambitious task to tackle on in such a short section as this. Thus, I restrict my inquiry into making a case for the potentials of the doctrine as it pertains to re-telling the deep story of the white working class.

Having said that, I will unfold my arguments in the following three steps. First, I should begin with the inextricable relationship between justice and justification in the Biblical traditions, especially from the Hebrew Bible, for it seems to be a scholarly consensus that separating justice from justification is one of the main causes of contemporary loss of appeal in the doctrine itself. Justice is an important concern for anyone living in the 21st century; showing how God’s justice constitutes God’s justifying acts, and vice versa, will open up a spacious room for bringing back the relevance of the doctrine to the interests of contemporary Americans. Second, given that the lost honor/shame, defined as ‘an emotional response to the experiences of insignificance in one’s worth as a human person,’ is one of the results of a distorted and fallen relationship between God and human persons, I will argue that the doctrine of justification by grace through faith, as inherent part of God’s justice will be able to help the white working class re-tell their deep story.

First, speaking in general, why has the doctrine of justification lost its appeal to contemporary audience in North America? This also means that the doctrine in its current formulation can no longer fulfill its role as critical discourse to the dominant culture, particularly that of shame among the white working class. There might be numerous answers to this question, but scholars seem to be in consensus that the loss of connection between justification and justice is one of the primary reasons for the contemporary loss of appeal in the doctrine, let alone the possibility of critiquing the dominant culture.

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21 See footnote 4.
In this regard, Kathryn Tanner draws on the contribution of biblical theology to restoring God’s justice back to God’s justification toward sinners. Unlike the traditional definition of biblical theology interpreting and articulating the conceptual apparatus of the Bible within the Bible itself, Tanner’s use of biblical theology actively engages and challenges the Christian traditions in light of biblical interpretation, the concern of which is oftentimes quite different from that of Christians living and working in post-biblical times. Therefore, while Paul’s concern in addressing God’s justification has to do with “showing the way in which God’s covenants extend beyond the Jews, and how God nevertheless remains faithful to the covenant promises made to them,” the theological concerns of Luther and Calvin in addressing God’s mercy of justification vis-à-vis justice are different not only from that of Paul, but from those of each other, as follows.

God’s mercy in Jesus Christ replaces the wrath of God under the law, which follows a strict canon of justice (Luther). Or, mercy and justice are commonly kept separate: God’s mercy enables us in some sense to keep the law, to be just, but God’s mercy does not substantially modify the nature of that law or justice; it seems a mere condition of its fulfillment (Calvinism).

In this light, Tanner understands one of the benefits of her doing of biblical theology as providing “a certain slant on the content of the terms of the account—a certain slant, that is, on the character and manner of divine initiative and the nature of human transformation.” In other words, reflecting the biblical understanding of the dynamic of justice and justification back into the contemporary theological problematics could result in shedding a new light on the calloused topic, especially in terms of redefining the God-human as well as the human-human relationship. This is precisely because the separation of justice from justification happened through the historical contextualizing processes of the doctrine. If so, what are so different about the biblical perspective on justice vis-à-vis justification from the contemporary one?

As for this question, Tanner says three things. “First, justice and righteousness are understood in the context of relationship. Second, they are not often opposed to mercy. And third, human justice and righteousness are often supposed to be modeled on, or correspond to, God’s own justice and righteousness.” Concerning the first point, justice and righteousness have emphasis less on judging and punishing the party held accountable for sin and more on restoring them back

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22 Kathryn Tanner, “Justification and Justice in a Theology of Grace,” Theology Today. Vol 55, Issue 4: 510-523. Also, for works on the deep connection between justice and justification, see footnote 44.

23 According to Tanner, biblical theology has three possible senses in its meaning. The first is whatever theologizing that engages the Bible in support of, or with reference to, the interpreter’s theological position. The second is biblical theology in its traditional sense, that is, “the interpreter’s constructive efforts to fill out and develop conceptually the germ of theological ideas or the evocative symbols, images, and stories, present in biblical texts.” Tanner hastens to add that this second sense “amounts here to commentary on the Bible that takes the theological ends of greater conceptual articulation and coherence for its goals.”

24 Ibid., 511.

25 Ibid., 513. Afterwards, Tanner elaborates more on the benefits of her biblical theology: “My procedure allows later Christian theologies to retain their own concerns while modifying them from within, so to speak, by making the use of their central terms (justification, righteousness, and justice) more biblical. One looks back to the Bible for illumination from the standpoint of someone properly working within post-biblical theologies of justification that are designed to respond to later histories of controversy.”

26 Ibid., 512.

27 Ibid., 514.
to their relationships with God and with the victims. In this regard, justification is given a new slant for redefining the God-human and the human-human relationships. “To justify someone is to restore that person to his or her proper or rightful place within the relationship, and thereby it involves the restoration or reconstitution of the relationship itself. Justice is that way of life, that body of ordinances or directives, set down by Yahweh.”28 This leads to Tanner’s second point of the dynamic of justice and mercy. If justice and righteousness are to be understood on relational terms, as is with justification, then God’s mercy cannot be the polar opposite of justice, as is often assumed. For that matter, God’s justification cannot be synonymous with mercy, as it is understood in separation from justice.

Yahweh does not break off relations with those who would make the covenant void by violating justice—those who oppress the widow and orphan. Yahweh does not break relations with them as they deserve—Yahweh is merciful. But in being merciful in this way, Yahweh remains righteous in the sense of faithful to the covenant, faithful to God’s own intent to be the God of Israel… God’s righteousness was, then, from the very beginning an act of mercy, something that was not owed.29

In light of Tanner’s first and second points, her third point of modelling human justice after God’s should not be hard to understand. In fact, Tanner puts this point concisely and cogently as follows. “The people of God are to act towards other human beings as God acts towards them—with a comparable sort of righteousness and justice. For example, God opposed their oppression by Pharaoh, and raised them up to a new life in fellowship with their God; so Israel is to oppose oppression in its midst and become a society in which special care is given to the dispossessed—the stranger, widow, and orphan.”30 This becomes the basis for which the doctrine of justification goes beyond the vertical God-human relationships toward the horizontal human-human relationship. Therefore, justification is never mere forgiveness of sins, nor simple reconciliation with God, nor the individual sinner’s liberation from guilt, but it involves offering mercy to others in view of restoring the broken relationship with them, for this restored relationship is based on God’s justice, which “means primarily that God works to eradicate human fault and restore the relations violated by it.”31

Now, such redefined relationship in light of God’s justifying acts vis-à-vis justice has enormous implication on the culture dominated by the lost honor, or shame, defined as ‘an emotional response to the experiences of insignificance in one’s worth as a human person.’ Below I elaborate more on this.

Living and breathing in such a culture, as in the culture of the white working class, one can naturally ask, how can God’s justifying acts in line with God’s justice not only critique such culture of shame, but also envision new lives for those inundated with the messages of shame? The message of the doctrine of justification is that God has restored the status of those who deem themselves unworthy and unlovable back to become the worthy and valuable ones before God, because a God of just mercy cannot do otherwise. A natural corollary of that message is that those who call themselves God’s people should do likewise to their neighbors, just as God has shown mercy to them. Thus, if fully accepted and believed, this message that God has justified

28 Ibid.
29 Ibid., 515.
30 Ibid., 516.
31 Ibid., 520.
the unworthy ones has tremendous potentials for restoring broken relationships, at both individual and communal levels. Thus, Miroslav Volf boldly proclaims that some of the first recipients of this message are those who suffer shame most: the poor and marginalized.

Could the hope for inner cities lie in part in the retrieval of the doctrine of justification by grace? How could dead streets receive life from a dead doctrine? Imagine that you have no job, no money, you live cut off from the rest of society in a world ruled by poverty and violence, your skin is the “wrong” color—and you have no hope that any of this will change. Around you is a society governed by the iron law of achievement. Its gilded goods are flaunted before your eyes on TV screens, and in a thousand ways society tells you every day that you are worthless because you have no achievements. You are a failure, and you know that you will continue to be a failure because there is no way to achieve tomorrow what you have not managed to achieve today. Your dignity is shattered and your soul is enveloped in the darkness of despair. But the gospel tells you that you are not defined by outside forces. It tells you that you count—even more, that you are loved unconditionally and infinitely, irrespective of anything you have achieved or failed to achieve, even that you are loved a tad bit more than those whose efforts have been crowned with success.\(^{32}\)

Now, how do we teach such acts of God’s justifying grace crystalized in the doctrine of justification to the white working class? I will close this paper with some suggestions for pedagogical concerns.

**Teaching God’s Justifying Grace for Hillbillies, Narratively**

The important premise to keep in mind as I begin the last section of this paper is that stories always entail identities, and vice versa. The deep story of the white working class ended up brewing in them identity of the lost honor and the corollary anger against the non-whites and immigrants. As an immigrant and an Asian American myself, teaching the white working class about God’s justifying grace is not just a matter of theory, but a crucial issue that I have to learn to help the white Americans deal with.

Having said that, my question for this section is, how do lives experience change? I believe the answer to that question lies in changing the narrative of the person(s). As I said already, intertwined with one’s narrative is one’s identity, for apart from one’s story of life there is no way to understand who one is, i.e., one’s identity. Therefore, the core issue for teaching God’s justifying grace to the depressed, angry white working class is to show them how God’s justifying grace restores their lost honor to them.

This teaching process could be done in the three following steps: showing them their deep story, showing them God’s justifying grace, and showing them how God’s justifying grace retells their deep story. If so, the role of teaching here is to help the two stories—the story of God’s

justifying grace and the deep story of the white working class—to encounter each other. This is called narrative encounter, characterized with the four following statements. According to Ivor F. Goodson and Scherto R. Gill, narrative encounter is: 1. Encounter requires attentiveness to the other, and otherness; 2. Encounter unfolds something new about the other, but also about the ‘other’ or the ‘unfamiliar’ of oneself; 3. Encounter has embedded in it the interplay of social and historical traditions; 4. Encounter involves different language(s), i.e., different modes of expression which play a part in enabling the fusion of horizon.

Given that the doctrine of God’s justifying grace has been rendered virtually irrelevant, and that the deep story of the white working class is about to bring upon the white working class all kinds of trouble, the encounter between the two narratives satisfy all four characterizations by bringing attention not only to the other, but also to the ‘other’ in the self. Besides, both the deep story of the white working class and Christian theology deserve to be called either a social or a historical tradition. Lastly, the encounter of these two narratives involves different modes of expression which are similar enough to enable the fusion of horizon.

When the white working class gets to see the honor-restoring power of God’s grace, they will no longer be holding on to their own deep story they have created, and the doctrine of God’s justifying grace, itself restoring its ‘honor’ of relevance to contemporaries, will go through changes in a way that is communicable to them. Moreover, what needs to be paid attention to is the role of narrative encounter in teaching emotion and desires. As is shown above, the primary emotion God’s justifying grace conveys to is the sense of honor, i.e., feeling of being recognized, which Hochschild acknowledged as the deep longing of the white working class. It is this longing for which their deep story is designed to fulfill, yet when they see that the deep story does not do the work, they turn to the Tea Party to fulfill this longing.

In that regard, narrative encounter should keep in mind this change of longing and emotion, from anger and depression to joy and honor. It is my hope that this paper does not remain an academic musing, but a practical step toward changing and helping the suffering white working class to be able to see the grace of God who honors them without belittling anyone or group of people, for everyone is created in the image of God, and we all deserve to be honored.