

A call to Justice

Introduction

We live in a sinful, broken and unjust world. "If you see the poor oppressed in a district, and justice and rights denied, do not be surprised at such things; for one official is eyed by a higher one, and over them both are others higher still" (Ecclesiastes 5:8). In the corrupt society of the Preacher's day, each official spied on the one beneath him in the hierarchy in order to obtain part of the spoils of taxation, graft, and greed. Not much has changed since then. Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920) said at the First Christian Social Congress in the Netherlands in 1891 that

the stronger, almost without exception, have always known how to bend every custom and magisterial ordinance so that the profit is theirs and the loss belongs to the weaker.

Frightful poverty next to fabulous wealth, social dislocation, urban sprawl and squalor, corruption in places high and low, dehumanizing work conditions, crime, inner city decay, family breakdown, unemployment, exploitation of nature, and callous injustice are grim realities. Today's social problems are difficult and complex. No one can wave a magic wand and take away every injustice. What should we, as Christ-confessors, do about the complex social needs of our time? If we are to contribute to the redress of injustice, we will need to develop a comprehensive Christian social philosophy, participate in the political process, and call for justice.

What is justice?

But what is justice? In the book *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, a number of contributors make the politically correct claim that all the religious traditions can share a common outlook on justice and liberation. But they overlook the obvious fact that world religions always had significant differences over social and political matters. There is no consensus on justice. Its very definition is up for grabs today. There is Communist justice, the justice of the ruthless dictator Saddam, the Islamic justice. In the name of Allah, Islam can justify terrorism. It wields the sword to extend Koranic influence and it approves of the execution of a Muslim who forsakes his faith. And there is modern Western liberal justice. It is viewed as a byproduct of enlightened legislation, progressive law, and sensitive judges.

Charity and justice

In some Christian circles, the term "justice" has become identical to charity. The selfless act of charity practiced by the Good Samaritan, personal involvement and compassionate private care (Luke 10:30-37), is stated as a classical example of what should be done for those in need. Of course, Christians should be good Samaritans for needy strangers. And the church should have a ministry of charity so that no man or woman within the fellowship of believers should suffer want or go without necessary apparel. From the very beginning to the present, the history of the church records a continuing care for the poor, sick and homeless. John Calvin, more than perhaps any of

the other Reformers, organized benevolence by making diaconal service to the poor a central office in the church and the city of Geneva. But charitable giving without raising ultimate questions about the causes of social maladjustment doesn't redress injustice. Poverty has many causes. Some are poor because of their lifestyle. Others are poor due to circumstances beyond their control. The globalization of the economy and the downsizing of personnel by many companies have led many hard-working people to the brink of poverty. In Third World countries, multitudes never have a chance to get ahead due to corrupt governments, exploitation or civil strife.

Love and justice

Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971) and many other theologians usually associate justice with love. They assert that justice is a function or political application of the law of love. They also claim that love is the fulfillment of justice. But justice cannot be defined in terms of love. Those who depend upon the state for justice must first ignore then the fact that it is not an agency of Christian love. As Professor William K. Frankena noted:

Societies can be loving, efficient, prosperous, or good, as well as just, but they may well be just without notably benevolent, efficient, prosperous or good.

Love is not the same as justice. But for Christians self-giving love for the oppressed is what motivates them to seek justice. This explains why they have penetrated the social conscience more widely and globally than those outside the Christian faith.

Greeks and justice

Greek philosophers were concerned about justice. They understood it in terms of the relationship between citizens and state. In their view, justice originates in man and not in God. Protagoras (490-410 BC) put the idea of justice into a humanistic framework in his famous statement that "man is the measure of all things." Plato (428-348 BC) viewed justice as a proper harmony within the individual and within the state. Injustice is a refusal to give another his due. Justice is the only way to achieve the ideal state on earth. Aristotle (384-322 BC) believed that man was a political and social animal, who "alone has any sense... of just and unjust." He distinguishes between two kinds of justice; general justice (a "good" disposition), and special justice - giving each one his just due. Justice "is a virtue which assigns to each man his due in conformity with the law," writes Aristotle, while injustice is a vice whereby man "claims what belongs to others, in opposition to the law."

Dr. Ian Hunter points out that Canadians envisage justice in the same manner as the ancient Greeks. They too see justice as a product of proper social organization, as man-made, the end result of social engineering. Hunter comments:

Canadians believe that justice is produced by a wise melding of the legislative, executive, and judicial functions, not the product of a broken and contrite heart.

Equality and justice

Defenders of the welfare state hold that society must be governed by the principle of equality. A fair and equal treatment for all is the foundation of a just society. But violation of this ideal of equality does not necessarily entail inequality of treatment. As Frankena points out, "If a ruler were to boil his subjects in oil, jumping in afterward himself, it would be an injustice, but there would be no inequality of treatment."

The apostle Paul says, "Masters, give unto your servants that which is just and equal" (Colossians 4:1 KJV). This is the core meaning of social justice. But to treat each equally is not to treat each exactly alike. The government which require of each of its citizens the same amount of taxes is not just and fair. Our society's obsession with equality and fairness for all tends to manifest itself only when there is a danger of someone else getting more than we think he or she deserves.

All people are to be treated as equals simply because they are created in the image of God. This justifies not only the equal treatment of citizens, but also a real concern for their well-being. Therefore, respect must be shown for the differences in talents, abilities, religion, education, training and colour of skin.

Bible and justice

It is wrong to say that God's Word only calls for the salvation of our souls. The Bible also has a message for the way we ought to live in God's world. And the Bible doesn't only address personal sins, but also social sins. It views social injustice as a matter of apostasy from the living God. The injustice tolerated by the ancient Hebrews in their midst was therefore looked upon as compromising God's character as the God of Justice. God is angry when people suffer injustice. "Because of the oppression of the weak and the groaning of the needy, I will now arise," says the Lord. "I will protect them from those who malign them" (Psalm 12:15). On numerous occasions the Old Testament mentions a judge (sometimes God Himself) vindicating the innocent and affording them their rights (Lamentations 3:59).

The jubilee laws prescribed that Israelite slaves be set free, the debts of all fellow Israelites be cancelled, and property returned to its original owners (Leviticus 25:8-55). The psalmists see God as the Father of the fatherless and the protector of widows (Psalm 68:5-6). They place their trust in the righteousness of God. Sooner or later, He will right all wrong. The book of Proverbs abounds with calls for justice. "Evil men do not understand justice, but those who seek the Lord understand it fully" (28:5). "The righteous care about justice for the poor, but the wicked have no such concern ... Whoever is kind to the needy honours God ... Speak and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy" (29:7; 14:31; 31:9).

When the prophets spoke, injustice had become woven into the very fabric of public life. The powerful and the wealthy exploited the poor. The prophets accuse Israel of the fundamental sins of idolatry and injustice, that is, of failure to trust in Yahweh alone and

to practice justice. In the well-known and powerful passage from chapter 5, the prophet Amos makes a connection between justice and worship: I hate, I despise your religious feasts;

I cannot stand your assemblies.
Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings,
I will not accept them.
Though you bring choice fellowship offerings,
I will have no regard for them. Away with the noise of your songs!
I will not listen to the music of your harps.
But let justice roll on like a river,
righteousness like a never-failing stream!
(5:21-24; see also Isaiah 1:11-17;58:112; Jeremiah 22:12-16)

When the Lord desires righteousness and justice, He is calling for the establishment of principles and practices which conform to His Word and Law. Justice then is the fruit of righteousness, the correct moral practice in daily and social life. Ian Hunter notes that righteousness guarantees good government and, with it, justice. Thus Isaiah proclaims, "A King shall reign in righteousness, and his rulers with justice" (32:1).

One's view of God's redemptive work in the Old Testament influences one's view of social justice. Many evangelical Christians refrain from sustained political participation in the realm of justice and law. Their understanding of salvation is too other worldly and individualistic in contrast to the strong social and this-worldly Old Testament understanding of salvation.

The coming of Jesus, the Son of God Incarnate, to earth is of great relevance for our understanding of justice. Our Lord renounced His status of privilege and humbled Himself (Philippians 2:1-11). God became flesh and made His dwelling among us (John 1:14a). This very act demonstrates the dignity of man as God's image bearer. Man is not junk but special in God's sight. The gospel proclaimed was not a social and political program, but something that goes much deeper. He laid down the norm that should guide social behaviour. Our Lord came to fulfill the law but not to repeal it. God didn't change His perfect standard of justice. From the very outset of His ministry Jesus explained the intent of His mission:

The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of Lord's favour (Luke 4:18.19)

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught that justice is an overall moral norm for Christian behaviour (Matthew 5:20; 6:1,33; see also Romans 6:13ff). Jesus is also our model for doing God's will in, this world. He showed through His life that the Biblical faith concerns itself not only with one's relationship to the heavenly Father, but also with the pains and hurts of this world. Jesus' ministry contradicts Karl Marx who understood

religion as an "opium of the people." The Peruvian evangelist, Samuel Escobar, reminds us that Jesus's presence among the poor was itself "the presence of a poor Man among the poor." The apostle Peter, who had seen Jesus' ministry first hand, testified that "he went about doing good" (Acts 10:38). Escobar notes that Jesus' language and imagery were meant for poor people: clothes that need patching, small coins misplaced, a poverty-stricken widow. Our Lord invariably took sides against those who were powerful and corrupt and for the suffering and oppressed.

A practical application

God is the only true legislator. Earthly rulers and parliamentarians alike are accountable to Him. God oversees all human action; disobedience to Him is sinful. Christians who know God's revealed principles of justice are called upon to resist unjust human laws and try to answer the cry for justice by the downtrodden and exploited. They should be among the first to oppose blatant injustice that contradicts God's revealed will and be ready to promote and support constructive alternatives. It would be an affront to Biblical Christianity if concern for social justice would be expressed only by secular humanists. As Dr. Carl F. H. Henry remarked:

A sensitive Christian conscience may and should be one of the most potent forces for social justice, not only when law requires transgression of divine commandments, but also when law promotes or preserves what is unjust; the spirit of prophetic indignation and protest is the Christian's holy heritage.

Public duty to civil government by the Christians includes challenging legal injustice and promoting legal justice. The 19th century school struggle in Holland illustrates this principle. In his campaign for the liberty for Christian parents to send their children to a Christian school without a financial penalty, Abraham Kuyper argued that as a matter of justice in society the state should support privately controlled schools. The same argument is used by the Ontario Alliance of Christian Schools to get financial support for Christian schools. It is a matter of legal justice.

Coerced sterilization and arbitrary removal of children from parents are unacceptable as they directly violate Biblical principles of justice and understanding of the family. Abortion must be resisted as it destroys the rights and the life of the unborn. Scripture teaches plainly that no woman may do with her body as she pleases. Since her body is owned by God, she cannot do with it whatever she thinks is fit. Abortion is therefore a trespass against the property rights of God. Since Canada no longer has a law to protect the life of the unborn, Christians should to their utmost to persuade legislators to give them legal protection.

They should remind legislators of their responsibilities to God and their constituents. In the 1536 edition of the *Institutes*, Calvin points to the justice magistrates must enforce.

We see, therefore, that they are ordained protectors and vindicators of public innocence, modesty, decency, and tranquillity, and that their sole endeavour should be to provide for the common safety and peace to all.

Though the Bible persistently calls for justice in an unjust world, it does not envision a brave new world ushered in through human effort. Divisions and sufferings will continue to be an integral part of human existence. Man will never achieve a perfect harmonious society. How can he when he is prone by nature to hate God and his neighbour? (Lord's Day 2, Q & A 5) As Christians work for justice, they must keep their eyes focussed on the second coming of our Lord and the new heaven and earth. And as they wait for His return they should keep in mind the importance of justice. The apostle Paul exhorts the church in Philippi to think upon it. "Finally brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just ... think on these things" (Philippians 4:8 KJV).

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