

JUSTICE AND BELONGING

I. Justice is relational

Above the Old Bailey stands the figure of a woman, holding a set of scales. She represents the archetype of British justice, weighing and balancing. The biblical view of justice is different in nature – it is fundamentally relational, about righteous behaviour towards those to whom we have obligations and who have expectations of us.

As Dunn and Suggate explain:

"[I]n Hebrew thought [justice] is a concept of relation ... People are righteous when they meet the claims which others have on them by virtue of their particular relationships. Thus, ... the king is righteous when he fulfils his responsibilities as king towards his people. The servant is righteous when he obeys his master."¹

But what are the king's responsibilities towards his people? What are governments' responsibilities towards their citizens?

In his book *Good News About Injustice*, Gary Haugen says:

"Justice occurs when power and authority is exercised in conformity with God's standards. Injustice occurs when power is misused to take from others what God has given them, namely, their life, dignity, liberty or the fruits of their love and labour."²

In the creation narratives in Genesis can be found the gifts of life, dignity, liberty, rewarding work and meaningful relationships. Justice occurs when power and authority are used to protect those gifts. "In God's order the State exists because of the

¹ James D.G. Dunn and Alan M. Suggate *The Justice of God: A Fresh Look at the Old Doctrine of Justification by Faith* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1993) 32-37.

² Gary Haugen *Good News About Injustice: A Witness of Courage in a Hurting World* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1999) 72.

basic social needs of people living together in society. God invests government with authority so that it can be the servant of all in furthering our common good."³ Our common good is furthered when the aims of preserving and enhancing life, dignity, liberty and opportunities for rewarding work and meaningful relationships are pursued by those with power and authority.

In the Old Testament, the Mosaic Law sets out a vision for Israel built around social groupings: the household, the kinship group and the tribe, each of which, without any regard for twenty-first century sensibilities, was headed by an adult Israelite male. Those disadvantaged by such a social structure were those without such a patriarchal figure to support them: the widow, the orphan and the foreigner.

Yet the Bible also reveals that the widow, the orphan and the foreigner, existing at the margins of society were, in their vulnerability, special objects of God's concern, and therefore ones for whom the righteous (i.e. just) in society would take special care over. Indeed, it was how the king treated the powerless which was focused on by the prophets and biblical commentators in assessing his reign. **Justice is power at the service of the powerless.**

II. Relationships are fundamental

Modern Liberal thought has been very good at secularising the Christian truth that individuals matter, to the point that the individual has become everything. Human relationships are not seen as permanent, as integral to who we are, but as things which we can pick up and put down at will.

The leading Modern Liberal thinker John Rawls argues in his book *A Theory of Justice* that justice requires that the interests of all be considered. In sharing out economic and social benefits, the starting point must therefore be material equality for all, and this can only be deviated from to the extent that giving some extra resources will mean that

³ John Gladwin *The Good of the People: A Christian Reflection on Living with the Modern State* (Marshall Morgan and Scott, 1988) 62.

everyone in the community, and especially the worst off will be better off (the "maximin" principle).⁴ Only then will we have a just society.

Despite its considerable merits, Rawls' theory is open to criticism because he is ultra-individualistic, and fails to place sufficient weight on people's relational identity. Rawls' liberalism views human beings as Kantian abstractions, hypothetical beings free to pick up and discard emotional attachments as they choose.

In contrast, Christian thinkers have recently been rediscovering that human being is fundamentally relational. Human identity and purpose is found and grounded in a threefold set of relationships – with God, with other human beings and with the rest of creation. Any account of justice which makes individual rights primary prejudices against communitarian benefits and communal interests.

Michael Schluter, who runs the Jubilee Centre and the Relationships Foundation, sees relationships as a key for making sense of the Old Testament laws and the New Testament's teaching. Professor Colin Gunton in *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology* argued strongly that the Church has failed to understand for far too long that the doctrine of the Trinity tells us that God is fundamentally relational – he exists in and as the permanent, unbreakable relationships between Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Professor Gunton goes on to state that since human beings are made in the image of God (Gen. 1:26-27), we are fundamentally relational beings too.

The Bible places the highest value on the individual. Each one of us is made in the image of God. Each one of us will be judged by him for our own sins (Ezek. 18: Rom. 3:23), and on the basis of our own response to his love for us expressed through his Son, Jesus Christ (John 3:16). The Bible also places the highest value on relationships. Relationships are fundamental to who we are as human beings. We do not exist only as individuals, we are people, with both our individual traits and our networks of relationships which impact on who we are. These twin truths are a powerful pointer towards the twin realities of individual responsibility and social responsibility.

⁴ Rawls *A Theory of Justice* (revd. edn.; Oxford University Press, 1999) 130-5, 266-7.

III. The Christian vision of a just society

The Christian vision of a just society is built around a distinctive understanding of the nature of the common good and of obligations of social solidarity.

A. The common good

Because human beings as individuals, are infinitely valuable, the teaching of the Christian Church is that the interests of one may not be sacrificed for the greater happiness of another. Because human relationships are fundamental to what it means to be human, those in human societies have responsibilities towards one another.

Catholic Social Teaching spells this out: “Hence every civil authority must strive to promote the common good in the interests of all, without favouring any individual citizen or category of citizen ... Nevertheless, considerations of justice and equity can at times demand that those in power pay more attention to the weaker members of society, since these are at a disadvantage when it comes to defending their own rights and asserting their legitimate interests.”⁵

B. Solidarity

The Bible quite clearly teaches about our obligations towards our fellow human beings. When God asked Cain about the killing of Abel, Cain replied “Am I my brother’s keeper?” (Gen. 4:9). No, Cain was not his brother’s keeper; he was his brother’s brother. The obligations of social solidarity arise not because we are fellow Christians but because we are fellow humans. Our obligations to one another cross the boundaries of class, status, nation and race.

The parable of the Good Samaritan makes plain that, whatever the distinctive obligations which we owe to our family, to other believers and to those within our town or nation, these can never be exclusive or exhaustive. Those who are lonely and needy who come across our path have claims to our attention and care which cannot be disregarded. As Oliver O'Donovan points out, the biblical command to 'Love your

⁵ *Pacem in Terris* 56.

neighbour' demands not an undifferentiated love for humanity at large, but instead an action and attitude which is dependent on contingent relations of proximity.⁶

The Catholic encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* describes solidarity as being “a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say, to the good of all and of each individual because we are all really responsible for all.”⁷

IV. Economic and social justice

A commitment to solidarity and to the good of all necessitates a commitment to social justice. If all are made in the image of God then all have the right to participate in the riches of his creation, both economic and social.

A. Economic justice

In relation to economic justice there are two broad categories of issue: the first is the process of production and sale itself - on what terms is it to take place, and what regulation (if any) will control this activity?; the second is, what proportion (if any) of the profits made will be re-distributed?

1. Regulation of economic activity

The creation ordinances provide a framework for human beings to fulfil their natural potential, albeit that its ultimate realisation is now frustrated by the Fall. Christopher Wright identifies four key creation values from the narratives in Genesis: the principle of shared access to and use of the land and natural resources, the privilege and responsibility of work, the principle of economic growth, and the principle of stewardship.⁸ He could also have added the principle of shared rest.

The Mosaic law placed strict limitations on economic activity, with laws about tithing (Lev. 27:30-32; Deut. 14:22-29), resting and gleaning (Lev. 19:9-10; Ruth 2:2) which all prevented land-owners from bleeding their land and their workers dry in the name of

⁶ O'Donovan *Resurrection and Moral Order* (2nd edn.) (Leicester: Apollos, 1994) 240.

⁷ *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* 38.

⁸ Christopher Wright *Living as the People of God: The Relevance of Old Testament Ethics* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1990) 85.

profit, exemplified in the Jubilee legislation. In place of profit maximisation there was an ethical framework for a form of profit optimisation.

2. (Re-)distribution of profits

It is impossible to ignore the plethora of biblical references which demonstrate that God has a special concern for the poor.⁹ In consequence, "[t]he whole infrastructure of the modern State - Parliament, Government, the Courts, the various levels of political life, if they are to be seen as deriving their authority and meaning from God Himself, must attend to the impact of their work on the poor, the distressed, the vulnerable."¹⁰

The American Baptist thinker, Ronald Sider, writes:

“I never thought that biblical revelation demanded absolute equality of income and wealth. ... I feel absolutely confident, however, that the biblical understanding of “economic equality,” or equity, demands at least this: **God wants every person, or family, to have equality of economic opportunity at least to the point of having access to the necessary resources (land, money, education) to be able to earn a decent living and participate as dignified members of their community.**”¹¹

The Mosaic law itself was designed to create a society of relative equality, in which each family possessed adequate land resources to be able to earn a reasonable and acceptable living. The thrust of the Old Testament Jubilee legislation was to ensure that everyone maintained a stake in society, by ensuring at least once in a lifetime, the return of the ancestral lands, which carried with them social status and the ability to earn a living.

⁹ For example, Exodus 23:19; Leviticus 19:10 and 23:22; Deuteronomy 15:11; 1 Samuel 2:8; Job 5:15; Psalm 10:14 and 35:10; Jeremiah 5:28-29; 21:12; Amos 2:6-7; Luke 4:18; James 2:5-6.

¹⁰ Gladwin *The Good of the People* 33.

¹¹ Sider *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* (London: Hodder, 1977 [1st edn.], 1997 [4th edn.]) xii.

B. Social Justice beyond the Economic

But the Christian approach to the issue of social justice goes beyond mere economics. Money is after all, only a tool, and the love of money a root of all kinds of evil (1 Tim. 5:10). The Bible clearly teaches: “A man’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.” (Luke 12:15). People can be impoverished by more than the lack of money. People can be socially and relationally impoverished. The poor identified in the Old Testament are typically the widow (relationally impoverished by the death of her husband), the orphan (relationally impoverished by the death of parent(s)) and the alien (relationally impoverished by separation from kin and culture).¹² Indeed, the Bible recognises that it is most often because of social and relational impoverishment than people become economically poor. For Western society, social justice would require a greater concern to ensure that all have adequate housing, proper nourishment, rewarding work, shared leisure time and leisure facilities, and appropriate education.

Against Rawls’ vision of unrelational human beings, existing in a world without purpose and able to construct a system of justice in their own image, the Christian vision is of human beings, made in the image of God, for relationship with God and relationship with one another, beings of inherent dignity and value, who should be free to labour and love. These are the good gifts of God to us both as individuals and as part of the human race. Justice is the exercise of power and authority in order to preserve and protect the good gifts of God, given as his common grace for all to enjoy in this lifetime whether or not they acknowledge his claim to their life. If justice is exercised as the expression of love in social organisation, then its claim to pre-eminence can be acknowledged.

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¹² See, for example, Zechariah 7:8-12.