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Disciplinary Brief

LOVE AS THE FOUNDATION FOR CHRISTIAN JUSTICE

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Introduction: Why must I be interested in Justice?

Professor Wolterstorff's Theology Brief on Justice and Rights demonstrates deep Christian thinking on a very important subject. Not only does it reinforce the centrality of justice in both the Old and New Testaments, it also shows the nexus between justice and rights, and makes the pertinent point that Christians need not be negative about discussions on rights since the roots of natural rights discussions can be traced to the "seedbed of medieval Christendom." All of these lead to the crucial point that questions of justice and rights underlie the subject matter of our academic disciplines.

This Theology Brief should challenge Christian scholars to search deeper within the boundaries of their academic disciplines. It should motivate us to reposition ourselves and find our voices amidst the concatenation of anti-Christian voices that dominate life in Academia today.

An important plank in the brief is the emphasis on First-Order justice. The focus on Ulpian's perspective on justice brings home the salient points that connect the concept of justice to obligation as well as to the inherent worth of individuals. These are strong themes that should guide Christian academics to excel and be relevant wherever they find themselves.

There are however questions that need to be addressed in our discussion of justice. What is the source and nature of justice from a Christian perspective? Are there no distinctly Christian approaches to justice and rights? How does my interest in justice differ from that of an atheist, a Buddhist or a Muslim? What is in my Christian faith that should motivate me to be interested in justice in my institution? Why should I be interested in the questions of justice that arise in my teaching and research? Is our interest in justice aimed at building a good and moral society? After that, what? Is the gospel message only about building a fair and moral society? Will any fair and moral society in the world be considered Christian? What is the overall purpose of this discussion anyway? Is there no salvific or missional purpose to the Christian interest in justice?

Love – the missing link

In my opinion, the real challenge for Christian scholars today is not merely to be engaged in issues of justice in their universities, but to understand the compelling reasons for this engagement. We need to develop a robust theory of Justice that is biblical and relevant to our world today. The Theology Brief does not take this path because it rejects a very important perspective in the discussion, which is that in the New Testament, justice has been superseded by love and that Jesus did not issue a justice-command but a love-command. Of course, as Professor Wolterstorff puts it, "acting justly is not incompatible with acting out of agapic love; it's an example of such love. Love and justice must be understood in such a way that love incorporates justice. This is a valid point, but it further highlights the point that love supersedes justice. There is no love without justice but there can be justice without love. You can give everyone their due even when you do not love them. You can do justice not out of conviction but out of the fear of the law and punishment. It is for that reason that Christian scholars must always have the Love commandment on their radar. If this is the case, if love must incorporate justice, then our discussion of justice should lead us to explore the concept of love. This is what I think may be missing in our Christian approaches to justice.

Jesus situates Justice on Love

Professor Wolterstorff states that biblical writers do not explain what justice is and that they do not offer a "theory" of justice. Therefore, he suggests that "For an explanation of what justice is, a theory, we have to turn to philosophers." I agree that there is a rich corpus of resources on justice in philosophic history which we can draw from, but should this be our guide? Is it true that the Bible does not give us a guide to a theory of justice?

Let us return to Matthew 22: 37-40 for better insight: "Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." What did Jesus mean when he said, "On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets?" I think that what he was really saying is that "On these two commandments hang the entire scope of justice." He was actually laying the foundations of a Justice theory and demonstrated it through his life. The true origin of Justice is in the nature of God. What Jesus did was to situate justice in the womb of love. He didn't philosophize about it; he lived it. It was left for Paul to lay down a full-blown theory of love in 1 Corinthians 13: "Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres."

The Superiority of Love-based Justice

The motivation of the Christian scholar to stand for justice should therefore rest on just one principle, Love – the love of God, love of man, love of Academia, love of students and colleagues, love of our institution, etc. It is this commitment to love that can motivate Christian academics to take action when confronted with injustice in society. Any concept of justice that is not rooted in love will end up finding its roots in law or the constitution, and the legal system is subject to periodic changes and amendments. When Jesus requires us to be just, is he simply asking us to obey the constitution?

There is a huge gap between Love-based justice and law-based justice.

In my experience as a Christian scholar, I have observed some of my colleagues display a commendable sense of justice. But in some cases, the Christian sense of justice ends up in a strict adherence to rules even when they are no longer reasonable. Therefore, the Christian witness, through the adherence to rule-based justice, sometimes becomes negative. The impression is given that Christians are rigid and not open to dialogue. I believe that if we practice true agape, we can teach the world the true meaning of justice. The problem however is that we have not given sufficient thought to the concept of love. And we ought to do so! In the modern day, eros is confused with Agape and the chief formulators of the concept of love are now in Hollywood.

The Missional Angle

Once again, I ask: what is the purpose of my interest in justice? If my interest in justice has no missional or salvific purpose, how far can I go? The whole point about Christianity is to redirect humanity back to the love of God. What is it about love that makes it redemptive? This is a question that Christian scholars should reflect on. From the life of Christ and the teachings of the Apostle, we can infer that love is sacrificial and selfless; it preserves the truth, the good and the beautiful; it draws people closer and promotes human solidarity. Therefore, it creates space for sincere engagement with the world, and increases the possibility of expanding the kingdom of God.

As individuals in our various institutions our primary focus ought to be the kingdom of God. Everything God did for mankind was motivated by love. Our interest in justice should also be motivated by love. Our interest in reconciling fallen humanity to God should motivate us not only to be just in our dealings with others (First Order) but to seek to transform our institutions with Christian values. Justice in this case, is therefore not an end but a means to an end. The end will be to demonstrate through our activities the love of God and give all men and women an opportunity to reconcile with God.

In my opinion, Justice without this salvific purpose is pointless. Furthermore, if we do not rest justice on love, we may surrender our commitment to a thoroughly Christian concept to secular philosophers or artists. Philosophers can only give us a limited perception of justice, and not a full picture. This is because justice is based on the nature of God, which is love. And this theory was there before Plato's theory of Justice.

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