

VERDICT

Essays 6, 7 and 8

1983

The Scandal of God's Justice- Part 1

Essay 6, pages 1- 14

Robert D. Brinsmead

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VERDICT

Verdict is committed to “Nothing But the Gospel, and the Gospel Plus Nothing.” It affirms that this gospel, according to the faithful testimony of Holy Scripture, concerns the objective, historical, finished and unrepeatable act of God on behalf of the human race in the life, death and resurrection of his Son, Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world. Verdict believes that the gospel is the joyful proclamation that all who believe in Christ’s life, death and resurrection on their behalf are forgiven, accepted of God and may have the assurance of eternal life. It also believes that all who belong to Christ will exhibit the spirit of Christ and live for God’s glory and the well-being of humanity.

Verdict is opposed to every religious accretion which corrupts the gospel. This includes sectarianism, which insists that salvation is found in believing the gospel plus something else; subjectivism, which confounds the gospel with religious experience; sentimentalism, which substitutes pious feelings about the Jesus of popular imagination for faith in the New Testament Christ; mysticism, which looks for the knowledge of God in private illumination; techniqueism, which advocates that salvation is attained through the application of religious formulas or disciplines; and nationalism, which identifies the cause of Christ with political or cultural self-interests.

Verdict’s commitment to “Nothing But the Gospel, and the Gospel Plus Nothing” is not a Christian reductionism which accepts less than the whole counsel of God. Rather, it is recognition that the gospel of Christ is God’s final word, beyond which there is no more profound knowledge or experience of God. This is not to imply that Verdict is unconcerned with the great range of issues which impinge on human existence, but it is to affirm the desire that the gospel determine and structure our view of everything else.

Essay 6, 1983

Introduction

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways”, declares the Lord.

“As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are, my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.” – Isa 55:8, 9.

Perhaps nothing illustrates this passage of Scripture better than the biblical concept of justice. The justice of God is so contrary to man's idea of justice that God's justice repeatedly takes man by surprise. God's justice is so amazing that it often leaves even his own people profoundly embarrassed and offended.

Luther acknowledged that he could not understand Paul's gospel at first because he did not understand what the apostle meant when he said that the gospel revealed

God's justice (Rom. 1:17). The Reformer's concept of God's justice was so influenced by Latin or Western thought that he could not understand why God's justice should cause him to sing and shout for joy. The Reformation was born when Luther began to understand the surprisingly kind face of God's justice. 1

In the subsequent four hundred years Protestantism did little to develop Luther's pathfinding concept of God's justice. Traditional Protestant theology was controlled more by Western views of Justice than by the Justice which God revealed in the gospel of his Son. Rather than allowing God's justice to radically redefine our understanding of justice, we have generally distorted the Bible with our own ideas.

In this investigation into the meaning of justice, we are not concerned with theological side issues. We are striking at the heart of the theological systems of Western Christianity. Such questions as the character of God, the meaning of the atonement and the nature of Christian ethics hinge on the biblical concept of justice.

The Linguistic Superiority, the Importance and the Meaning of Justice

The Linguistic Superiority of the word “Justice”

The English language has the word group *righteous, righteousness* and *right-wise*, and another word group *just, justification* and *justify*. The first group is derived from the Anglo-Saxon, while the second is from the Latin. The word *righteousness* is generally reserved for church and "God-talk". Justice is used to discuss concrete social and political issues on earth. 2 These linguistic differences tend to obscure the fact that the Bible does not use one word for righteousness and another for justice. And furthermore, neither do most other languages today. 3 The Old Testament has one word— *sadaq*— for righteousness and justice. New Testament Greek also has one word— *dikaiosune*. Thus, “justice is righteousness and righteousness is justice”. 4

The Roman Catholic Douay Version of the Bible generally translates the Old Testament *sadaq* and the New Testament *dikaiosune* as “justice,” while the Protestant King James Version usually translates them as “righteousness”. The word justice never appears in the King James Version of the New Testament, while the word *righteousness* is seldom found in the Douay Version. Catholic dictionaries of the Bible generally prefer to discuss *sadaq* and *dikaiosune* under the heading of “justice”, while Protestant dictionaries prefer “righteousness”. For the following reasons, we suggest that the word *justice* is preferable to the word *righteousness* when translating from the biblical Hebrew and Greek:

1. *Righteousness* has become too “churchy” and other-worldly. *Justice* is a word which ordinary people understand and use in their concrete earthly existence. The Bible speaks in the language of the common people rather than in the esoteric vocabulary of the scholar.

2. *Righteousness* tends to convey a heavenly piety which misses the earthy, robust call for concrete social ethics found in the Old Testament prophets.

3. When the word *justice* is substituted for *righteousness*, familiar texts often have more impact. Some become quite startling. For example, the psalmist's appeal for forgiveness on the ground of God's justice (Ps. 51:14) seems to contradict our association of God's justice with giving a person what he deserves. The word *justice* tends to be more shocking than *righteousness*— but the shock is often needed to bring the Bible to life.

4. When we use the word *justice* rather than *righteousness*, we are not so apt to miss the obvious fact that the biblical words *justify* and *justification*, are simply grammatical variations of the word *justice*. As A. E. McGrath has said, “The concept of justification is inextricably linked with that of justice, both linguistically and theologically”. ⁵ In the Hebrew, for example, *justify* is simply the verbal form of the word *sadaq* (justice), i.e., it means doing justice or having justice done to or for an object.

The Importance of Justice

Justice (*sadaq*) is arguably the most important Old Testament word which describes the character and activity of God (see 2 Chron. 12:6; Neh. 9:8; Ps. 7:9; 103:17; 111:3; Jer 9:24; Dan. 9:14; Zeph. 3:5; Zech. 8:8). It is also the most apt single word which distinguishes God's people from the rest of mankind.

There is absolutely no concept in the Old Testament with so central a significance for all the relationships of human life as that of [*sadaq-justice*]. ⁶

Righteousness [*justice*]... is for the Hebrews the fundamental character of God. ⁷

Justice is the heart of biblical theology. It is central to the message of the Bible. Our understanding of God's justice will therefore affect our view of the atonement, the last things, the church and the nature of Christian existence. If we radically change our concept of justice— and that is the purpose of this essay— we must radically change our concept of the atonement, the church and Christian life.

The Basic Meaning of justice

While the biblical concept of justice has many facets, we intend to isolate the basic meaning of the Old Testament word *sadaq*. Most scholars today warn against reading the Western idea of justice back into the Old Testament word *sadaq*.

The equation of Hebrew and Western understandings of justice is frequently implicit in theological works: however, this assumption is utterly untenable, and is to be rejected. 8

Righteousness [justice] as it is understood in the OT is a thoroughly Hebraic concept, foreign to the Western mind and at variance with the common understanding of the term. 9

A TWENTIETH-CENTURY reader encountering the word righteousness [justice] in Semitic texts must always be careful to adjust his thought and not to place this term in the categories to which our word righteousness has accustomed us. 10

There seems to be a consensus among Old Testament scholars that *sadaq* has two basic meanings (which are two aspects of one idea):

1. *Sadaq* has to do with relationships. Most scholars now follow von Rad, who says that *sadaq* “is out and out a term denoting relationship,” 11 i.e., loyalty to a relationship. Thus, E. R. Achtemeier says:

Righteousness [justice] is in the OT the fulfillment of the demands of a relationship, whether that relationship, be with men or with God. Each man is set within a multitude of relationships: king with people, judge with complainants, priests with worshipers, common man with family, tribesman with community, community with resident alien and poor, all with God. And each of these relationships brings with it specific demands, the fulfillment of which constitutes righteousness. The demands may differ from relationship to relationship: righteousness in one situation may be unrighteousness in another. Further, there is no norm of righteousness outside the relationship itself. When God or man fulfils the conditions imposed upon him by a relationship he is, in OT terms, righteous. 12

2. When a party fulfils the demands of a relationship, that party conforms to what ought to be. Then a state of *sadaq* (justice) exists. Thus, *sadaq* “concerns the 'right order of things'— i.e. the correct ordering of the world according to the divine intention.” 13 Thus, some scholars say that justice is conformity to the created order of things. 14 When even weights and measurements are true to what they ought to be, they are said to be *sadaq*, i.e., just (Lev. 19:36: Ezek. 45:10). When sacrifices are what they ought to be, they also are said to be *sadaq* (Ps.4:5; 51:19).

Justice in the Mighty Acts of God

The special revelation of God does not take place in nature— his created works— nor in abstract propositions about himself, nor in diffuse mystical experiences of the divine. As far as the Bible is concerned, the special revelation of God takes place in history. History is the stuff of revelation. God is revealed by his mighty acts in history.

The Old Testament is a record of God's mighty acts. The most dominant event in Israel's history was the Exodus. As far as Israel was concerned, God was "whoever it was" who brought Israel up out of Egypt. The mighty act of the Exodus showed who God was and what he was like in the past, in the present and for the future. In the Old Testament the true worship of God— i.e., giving God his worth consists in reciting or rehearsing the mighty acts of God, especially recounting what God did in the Exodus. Thus:

Shout with joy to God, all the earth! Sing to the glory of his name; offer him glory and praise Say to God, "How awesome are your deeds! So great is your power that your enemies cringe before you. All the earth bows down to you; they sing praise to you, they sing praise to your name." *Selah*

Come and see what God has done, how awesome his works in man's behalf! He turned the sea into dry land, they passed through the river on foot— come, let us rejoice in him. – Ps 66:1-6.

The biblical word which most adequately and most frequently sums up God's mighty acts is the word *sadaq* (justice). In these acts God's justice is published for all to see.

My mouth will tell of your righteousness [*sadaq* -justice], of your salvation all day long, though I know not its measure. I will come and proclaim your mighty acts. O Sovereign Lord; I will proclaim your righteousness [*sadaq*– justice], yours alone. Since my youth, O God, you have taught me, and to this day I declare your marvelous deeds. Ps.71:15-17.

Great is the Lord and most worthy of praise: his greatness no one can fathom. One generation will commend your works to another; they will tell of your mighty acts. They will speak of the glorious splendor of your majesty, and I will meditate on your wonderful works. They will tell of the power of your awesome works, and I will proclaim your great deeds. They will celebrate your abundant goodness and joyfully sing of your righteousness [*sadaq*– justice]. Ps. 145:3-7: see also Judges 5:11; 1 Sam. 12:7; Ps. 19:24; 48:10: 71: Isa. 51:5-12; 56:1: Micah 6:4, 5.

As one reviews these and many other passages which witness to the justice of God in his mighty acts, one fact is made prominent by its remarkable repetitiveness: God's justice is associated with his acts of salvation and deliverance, and with his deeds of mercy and forgiveness.

Justice = Salvation.

Deliver me in your [*sadaq*– justice]. Ps. 31:1

My mouth will tell of your *sadaq* [justice], of your salvation all day long. Ps 71:15.

I am bringing my *sadaq* [justice] near; ...and my salvation will not be delayed. Isa 46:13.

My *sadaq* [justice] draws near speedily, my salvation is on the way, and my arm will bring justice [*sadaq*] to the nations. Isa. 51:5

For, he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of *sadaq* [justice]. Isa. 61:10.

In 1 Samuel 12:7-12 God's justice plainly means his saving deeds in the deliverance of Israel (see also Judges 5:11).

Justice = Mercy and Forgiveness

Have mercy on me, O God... blot out my transgressions. .. Save me from bloodguilt, O God, the God who saves me and my tongue will sing of your *sadaq* [justice]. Ps. 51:1, 14

Justice = Deliverance of the Oppressed

Perhaps the justice of God is most prominent in those passages of Scripture which speak of delivering the oppressed. For example:

The Lord reigns forever; he has established his throne for judgment. He will judge the world in righteousness; he will govern the peoples with justice. The Lord is a refuge for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble. Ps. 9:7-9

The Lord is King for ever and ever; the nations will perish from his land. You hear, O Lord, the desire of the afflicted; you encourage them, and you listen to their cry, defending the fatherless and the oppressed, in order that man, who is of the earth may terrify no more. Ps. 10:16-18

"You rescue the poor from those too strong for them, the poor and needy from those who rob them." Ps. 35:10.

The Lord works *sadaq* [justice] and *mishpat* [judgment] for all the oppressed. Ps. 103:6.

He upholds the cause of the oppressed and gives food to the hungry. The Lord sets prisoners free, the Lord gives sight to the blind, the Lord lifts up those who are bowed down, the Lord loves the righteous. The Lord watches over the alien and sustains the fatherless and the widow, but he frustrates the ways of the wicked. Ps 146:7-9.

The Old Testament never tires of reciting God's deed in delivering the oppressed Hebrew slaves from Egypt. This event forever stamped God's justice as that which executes deliverance for all, that are oppressed (Ps. 103:6). If we may anticipate the New Testament gospel here, we would simply indicate that the resurrection is the

preeminent event which proves that God's justice works deliverance for all that are oppressed. Jesus was the most oppressed man who ever lived. The oppression of every son and daughter of Adam was summed up in him. But God's justice raised him from the dead in the real exodus of human history. (Luke 9:31)

Resolving an Apparent Anomaly in God's justice

In Western thinking it is difficult to see that deeds of salvation and deliverance toward sinful people could be called an exercise of God's justice. We can readily understand that the overwhelming kindness toward undeserving people could be called "mercy," but to call it "justice" seems very strange. The consistency of biblical thought, however, will become clear if we relate God's saving acts to the basic meaning of *sadaq*. Fundamentally, justice means faithfulness to a relationship, or being true to what God intended one to be. When justice is applied to God, it therefore means:

1. God is faithful to his covenant promise. God's covenant is not a conditional contract bilaterally concluded by two parties. It is a unilateral commitment or promise on God's part to act toward his chosen covenant partner with overwhelming kindness and generosity. From the beginning God has had a purpose of grace toward mankind (2 Tim. 1:9). He has had a commitment to fulfill this gracious purpose at any cost to himself. Thus, when God exercises his saving mercy toward sinful people, he is simply fulfilling his covenant promise. Justice is God faithfully carrying out just what divine love had pledged to do.

He is *faithful* in all he does. The Lord loves *sadaq* [justice] Ps. 33:4, 5.

Will their [Israel's] lack of faith nullify God's faithfulness? ... Our unrighteousness brings out God's righteousness more clearly Rom 3:3-5.

It is not as though God's word had failed – Rom 9:6.

In these and many other passages God's faithfulness to his covenant promise and his justice are equated.

In both the OT and Paul, therefore, the primary meaning of divine justice is God's merciful fidelity to His promises of eschatological salvation for His people despite His people's sins. 15

The justice of God meant His fidelity to His covenantal promises. 16

2. Justice is the ordering of things according to the divine intention.

Part of this "right order of things" is violated by the very existence of the poor and needy and especially of the oppressed: therefore, if *sadaq* [justice] is to be established God must deliver these unfortunates from their plight. 17

For this reason, God's justice comes to be associated with God's liberating acts of salvation.

God's justice is even biased in favor of the poor and oppressed. This does not imply any unjust partiality. Justice would teach us that people who have suffered special deprivation should have special attention. A mother of a large family was once asked which of her children she loved the most. She replied, "The one who is sick, until he is well: the one who is away, until he is home; the one who is disaffected, until he is reconciled." This is how it is with God's justice.

3. Another way to show that God's justice is equated with his saving mercy is to show that justice is God's being true to himself. From the beginning God pledged himself to be overwhelmingly kind to undeserving people. He would be this because his love called him that way. Wherever human misery and need would exist, even though self-inflicted, God would be irrevocably committed to the wretched. As Paul said, "He will remain faithful, for he cannot disown himself" (2 Tim. 2:13).

God's justice may therefore be defined as God's acting for the sake of his name which is a biblical way of saying that God remains God. John Piper cites such passages as Psalm 143:1, 2; Isaiah 43:25; 44:23; 46:13; 48:9-11 and Daniel 9:7, 13-19 to show that God's justice is his "absolute faithfulness always to act for his own name's sake and for the preservation and display of his glory." 18

Contrasting God's Concept of Justice and the Western Concept of Justice

We are now ready to contrast the biblical concept of justice and the Western or Latin concept of justice. This will demonstrate the truth in E. R. Achtemeier's claim that the biblical view of justice is "foreign to the Western mind and at variance with the common understanding of the term." 19

1. It Is Not Distributive Justice.

The Latin concept of justice was called *justitia distributiva* (distributive justice). This meant giving every man exactly what he deserves or merits. This became the standard Western idea of justice. It influenced the way the Western church read the Bible and interpreted many of the great doctrines of the Christian faith.

The justice of God's mighty acts, however, is not based on either the merits or demerits of people. If that were true, God's acts could not be called acts of justice. God's justice is based on his being true to what he has promised in his gracious covenant. If God is to be just, he must be true to his commitment to help and to save

wretched, undeserving people. This biblical idea of justice, first presented in the Old Testament, is beautiful and powerful in its utter simplicity. Nevertheless, Western theology insists that justice must somehow be related to what man deserves (distributive justice). In order to preserve this supposed justice of God, Western theology has had to resort to legal manipulation in an act of atonement in which God is forced to respect the principle of distributive justice. Or even worse, God becomes a celestial Shylock so passionately committed to the principle of distributive justice that he must have his pound of flesh (this is called “satisfying God's justice”) before he can forgive.

2. It Is Not Justice in Tension with Mercy.

In Western theology justice is the opposite of mercy. The classical Latin theory of the atonement—generally regarded as orthodox in the Western church—is based on a supposed tension between justice and mercy. It is said that this tension between justice and mercy was overcome by Christ, who reconciled the prerogatives of both by his death on the cross. But it is not difficult to show from the Old Testament that *sadaq* often has the meaning of mercy. A.E. McGrath, for example, shows that the translators of the Septuagint 20 were repeatedly forced to use the Greek word *eleemosune* (mercy) to translate the Hebrew word *sadaq*. 21 When the Bible was translated into Latin, this became *miser cordia*—meaning mercy. Because the force of the original Hebrew was lost, there was a tendency to set justice and mercy in opposition. McGrath says:

It is clear that a considerable misunderstanding of the Old Testament text could result at this point, perhaps resulting in the setting up of a tension between God's *miser cordia* [mercy] and *iustitia* [justice] where no such tension is warranted by the text itself. 22

In light of this evidence, we need to rethink the traditional ideas about the cross “satisfying God's justice.” The great emphasis in the New Testament is on fulfilling his ancient promise concerning mercy and salvation. There is no tension between justice and mercy here. God satisfied justice by doing for poor, lost, sinful humanity everything he had planned from the beginning.

3. It Is Not Primarily a Punitive justice.

Justice which is distributive (i.e., giving to every man his due) and which is the opposite of mercy inevitably becomes equated with God's act of punishing men for their sins. If forgiveness is extended to them, it is only because the punishment fell on Calvary substitutionary victim. What fell on Christ is called “justice” (according to the traditional interpretation of Romans 3:25, 26), while the pardon granted the believer is called “mercy”. This classical Latin theory of the atonement reinforces the idea that God's justice is primarily punitive. No wonder Luther trembled when he read in Paul that God's justice is revealed in the gospel!

Later, Luther came to see from the Old Testament evidence that God's justice is primarily saving and liberating. McGrath states that “the Hebrew [*sadaq*] cannot bear the sense 'to punish' or 'to condemn.’” 23 E. R. Achtemeier says:

Yahweh's righteousness is never solely an act of condemnation or punishment. There is no verse in the OT in which Yahweh's righteousness is equated with his vengeance on the sinner, and not even Isa. 5:16 or 10:22 should be understood in such a manner. Because his righteousness is his restoration of the right to him from whom it has been taken, it at the same time includes punishment of the evildoer; but the punishment is an integral part of the restoration. Only because Yahweh saves does he condemn. His righteousness is first and foremost saving. He is a “righteous God and a Savior”. 24

While some scholars argue (on the basis of such texts as 1 Kings 8:32; 2 Chronicles 12:6; Isaiah 5:13-17; 10:22; Lamentations 1:8 and Daniel 9:13-19) that God's *sadaq* can sometimes be equated with God's vengeance on the sinner, it is still true that God's *sadaq* generally has the positive meaning of deliverance, help and salvation. Yet deliverance of the oppressed implies destruction of the oppressor. As Stendahl declares:

When God's judgment falls, it is mercy to those wronged and doom for those who have done wrong or perpetuated and profited from the wrong of others. 25

4. It Is Not a justice Which Is Primarily Associated with Gloom and Doom.

Distributive justice— justice which is the opposite of mercy, justice primarily concerned with the punishment of sinners inevitably has overtones of gloom and doom. The faithful may sing of mercy, but even angels are supposed to tremble at the thought of justice. In the tradition of the Western church, justice and judgment primarily carry the connotations of gloom and doom.

In the Bible, however, the justice of God is something to sing and shout about. The people of the Old Testament often exult in songs of unrestrained joy as they experience or anticipate the manifestation of God's justice (Judges 5:11; Ps. 96:10-13; 97:6-12; 98; 99).

The Old Testament especially associates justice with the coming reign of God. In the Bible the kingdom of God and the justice of God are virtually synonymous terms (Matt. 6:33). If the Old Testament anticipates the kingdom of God- the reign of justice- with singing, what shall we say of the New Testament, which everywhere announces the actual presence of that kingdom in the person of the Messiah? Is not the inauguration of this reign of justice celebrated with great joy (Luke 2:10-14) and with eating and drinking?

When Jesus continually says that the “kingdom of God is like ... ,” we may substitute, the justice of God is like ...” If we read his parables and teaching this way, we will be forcefully impressed that God's justice is indeed an overwhelming surprise which completely overturns our human concepts of justice.

Notes and References

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the New International Version

1. See Martin Luther. “Preface to the Complete Edition of Luther's Latin Writings: Wittenberg, 1545” *Career of the Reformer: 1V*, ed. Lewis W Spitz, Luther's Works, American ed. 54 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House; Philadelphia: Mulenberg Press. 1955-1975) 34:336-37
2. See Sidney Rooy. “Righteousness, and Justice.” *Evangelical Review of Theology* 6, no. 2 (Oct. 1982): 260-65
3. “The English language distinguishes between 'justice' and 'righteousness'. In the world one speaks about justice, and in the church one speaks about righteousness. But Hebrew, Greek, and Latin do not offer that distinction” (Krister Stendahl, “Judgment and Mercy,” in Alexander J. McKelway and E David Willis, eds., *The Context of Contemporary Theology: Essays in Honor of Paul Lebmann* [Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1974], p 149)
4. Rooy, “Righteousness and Justice.” p 265
5. A.E. McGrath, Justice and Justification: Sematic and Juristic Aspects of the Christian Doctrine of Justification,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 35, no. 5 (1982): 404-5
6. Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, vol 1, *The Theology of Israel's Historical Traditions*, tr. D.M.G. Stalker (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1962), p. 370.
- 7 Alan Richardson. *An introduction to the Theology of the New Testment* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers. 1958). P 79.
8. McGrath, “Justice and Justification,” p. 405.
9. E.R. Achtemeier, “Righteousness in the OT,” George Arthur Buttrick, ed., *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), 4:80.
10. H. Cazelles, quoted in Lester J. Kuyper, “Righteousness and Salvation.” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 30. No 3(1977): 233.
11. Von Rad, *Israel's Historical Traditions*, p. 371.
12. Achtemeier, “Righteousness in the OT,” p. 80. See also George Eldon Ladd, who defines *sadaq* as “faithfulness to a relationship” (George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1974] p. 440
13. McGrath, “Justice and Justification,” p 407.
14. A. E. McGrath states, “Justice is essentially a theological concept, reflexing the rectitude of the created order” (ibid, p. 415). Graeme Goldsworthy declares, “The order of creation is the paradigm of righteousness, not as a static or abstract idea, but as a dynamic relational structure of reality determined by the sovereign Creator.” (Graeme Goldsworthy, “The Old Testament and Christian Existence.” *Verdict* 3, no. 1 [Mar. 1980]:31)
15. Art. “justice of God,” *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (Palatine, Ill.: Publishers Guide, 1966), 8:74.

16. Art. "Justice of Men," *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 8:75.

17. McGrath, "justice and Justification," p 407.

18. See John Piper, "The Demonstration of the Righteousness of God in Romans 3:25, 26," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, Issue 7 (Apr. 1980): 2-32. It seems unfortunate that Piper felt compelled to argue that God's justice means faithfulness to his name and *not* faithfulness to his covenant. The two definitions are not mutually exclusive but necessarily complementary, ie., two aspects of one great reality. Piper is therefore right in what he affirms but wrong in what he denies.

19. Achtemeier, "Righteousness in the OT," p. 80.

20. The famous Greek version of the Old Testament (c.200 B.C.) was called the Septuagint or LXX because tradition suggests that it was the work of seventy Jewish translators.

21. See Ps. 24:5; 33:5; 35:24; 103:6; Isa. 56:1; Dan. 9:24.

22. McGrath, "Justice and Justification," p. 412. McGrath presents the Table, just below, to demonstrate that the Septuagint translators employed two main terms to translate *sadaq*: *dikaiousune* and *eleemosune*, the choice depending upon the apparent meaning of *sadaq* in the passage concerned (p. 410):

TABLE I
Translations of קָדַשׁ-words by LXX
and the Vulgate

Root	LXX	Vulgate	Examples
קָדַשׁ	δικαιοσύνη	<i>iustitia</i>	Ps 17.15; 45.8
	ἐλεημοσύνη	<i>iustitia</i>	Ps 35.24
קָדַשׁ	δικαιοσύνη	<i>iustitia</i>	Gen 15.6; Deut 33.21
	ἐλεημοσύνη	<i>misericordia</i>	Ps 24.5; 33.5; 103.6
		<i>elemosyna</i>	Dan 4.24†
קָדַשׁ	ἔλεος	<i>iustitia</i>	Isa 56.1
	εὐφροσύνη	<i>iustitia</i>	Isa 61.10
	דִּיקָיִם	<i>iustus</i>	Gen 7.1; Prov 29.2
קָדַשׁ	εὐσεβής	<i>iustus</i>	Prov 12.12; Isa 26.7
	δικαιοῦν	<i>iustificari</i>	Isa 43.26; Jer 3.11
קָדַשׁ	δικαιοσύνη	<i>misericordia</i>	Prov 20.28; Isa 63.7
יָשָׁר	δίκαιος	<i>rectus</i>	Job 1.1; Prov 3.32
נָקִי	δίκαιος	<i>innocens</i>	Job 9.23; 17.8
רָיָה	δικαιοῦν	<i>facio iudicium</i>	Micah 7.8

† once only

Note the greater consistency in translation shown by the Vulgate, as compared with the LXX.

This table is intended to illustrate the greater consistency of the Vulgate, and is not intended to be exhaustive.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 411

24. Achtemeier, "Righteousness in the OT," p. 83

25. Stendahl, "Judgement and Mercy," p. 150.

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Verdict is committed to “Nothing But the Gospel, and the Gospel Plus Nothing.” It affirms that this gospel, according to the faithful testimony of Holy Scripture, concerns the objective, historical, finished and unrepeatable act of God on behalf of the human race in the life, death and resurrection of his Son, Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world. Verdict believes that the gospel is the joyful proclamation that all who believe in Christ’s life, death and resurrection on their behalf are forgiven, accepted of God and may have the assurance of eternal life. It also believes that all who belong to Christ will exhibit the spirit of Christ and live for God’s glory and the well-being of humanity.

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Verdict’s commitment to “Nothing But the Gospel, and the Gospel Plus Nothing” is not a Christian reductionism which accepts less than the whole counsel of God. Rather, it is recognition that the gospel of Christ is God’s final word, beyond which there is no more profound knowledge or experience of God. This is not to imply that Verdict is unconcerned with the great range of issues which impinge on human existence, but it is to affirm the desire that the gospel determine and structure our view of everything else.

Essay 7, 1983

Introduction

In our previous essay (“The Scandal of God's Justice— Part 1”) we found that biblical justice must not be confused with the Western idea of justice. Biblical justice is not a mere conformity to a legal norm but faithfulness to a relationship. God's justice is his merciful fidelity to his covenantal promise, despite his people's sins.

In this present issue we look at the meaning of justice in Israel, in Israel's king and, finally, in Israel's Messiah. Having acquainted ourselves with this Old Testament background, the stage will be set to re-examine in later issues the Christian doctrine of the atonement.

Justice in Israel

The fundamental meaning of justice is loyalty or faithfulness to the relationships of the created order. The just man or the just community is rightly related to God and rightly related to the neighbor.

God revealed himself to Israel in his mighty acts of deliverance and salvation in order that Israel might respond in complete dependence on God. The just are:

...those who wait for him (Isa. 33:2; Mic. 7:7-9), who hope in him (Ps. 69:6; 71:5, 14; 146:5), who seek after him (Ps.69:6, 32), who trust in him (Ps. 71:5; 143:8): cf. Ps. 33. They are those who know Yahweh (Ps.36:10), who fear him (Ps. 103:11, 13, 17), who love his name (Ps. 69:36). He is their fortress. In a world in which they are oppressed and needy, the Lord is their sole refuge (Ps.5:7-12: 14:6; 31; 36:7; 52:6-7; 71:1-3; 94:22; 118:8-9; 143:9). Thus, as opposed to those who trample them underfoot, as over against those who trust in riches (Ps. 52:7), they trust in Yahweh, crying to him in their distress (Ps. 35; 88; 116; 140), bowing before his judgments (Ps. 94:12; 118:18), acknowledging their sin (Ps.32:51), offering to him a broken spirit and a contrite heart (Ps. 51:17). Yahweh is their only hope and sure salvation. They turn to him in faith. 2

When Paul argues that justice by faith is not contrary to the law (Rom. 3:31), he proves his point by recalling what the law says concerning Abraham— he believed God and that was considered justice (Gen. 15:6; Rom. 4:3). From the perspective of Israel's relationship to God, justice is faith in God. He who has faith in God is just in the sight of God (Hab. 2:4).

From the perspective of Israel's relationship to fellow-man, justice means deeds and attitudes which correspond to God's acts of justice. Israel must not mistreat or oppress an alien, because they too were aliens in Egypt (Exod. 22:21; 23:9). God's people must not take advantage of the weak and poor such as widows and orphans, because God, as helper of all the oppressed, would surely fight against the oppressor (Exod. 22:22-24). The Hebrews must not mistreat slaves, because the Exodus proves that God is on the side of the oppressed (Deut. 23:15, 16). "He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the alien, giving him food and clothing. And you are to love those who are aliens, for you yourselves were aliens in Egypt" (Deut. 10:18, 19). The psalmist 4 declares that God rises in judgment to save all those who are oppressed (Ps. 76:8, 9; see also Ps.103:6). And Jeremiah writes that the Lord delights to exercise kindness and justice in all the earth (Jer.9:24). That is the way Israel must behave in her relationship with others if justice is to live in her community.

This helps us understand why the Hebrew word *sadaq* (justice) often means deeds of mercy, especially kindness and compassion (Ps. 112:9; Isa.58:1-8; Dan. 4:24-27). For this reason the Septuagint translates *sadaq* as "giving alms" fourteen times. Following this example, the King James Version translates *dikaosune* (justice) as almsgiving in Matthew 6:1.

The just or righteous man of the Old Testament is a man of compassion and benevolence, especially toward the poor, the needy and the oppressed (see Job 29:7-17; 31:16-22). God's act of justice in the Exodus informs him that God's justice is biased toward the disadvantaged. The just man also acts in the same spirit toward the oppressed (see Exod.22:21, 22; 23:9; Deut. 23:15, 16).

Thus, *sadaq* is often correlated with mercy, care for the poor and the widows, defending their cause in the law-courts, etc. (Job 29:16; 31:21; Prov. 31:9; Hosea 2:19).

The righteous in the covenant will demonstrate their righteousness, by a willing self-dedication in service to bring deliverance and restoration to the needy and afflicted who are unable to help themselves. 5

Old Testament justice goes beyond legal correctness. “The righteous, care about justice for the poor, but the wicked have no such concern” (Prov. 29:7).

Thus, on the one hand justice consists in nothing but hope and trust in God, and on the other hand it consists in deeds of compassion and assistance toward the disadvantaged and oppressed. Faith fulfills the demands of the vertical relationship, while deeds of mercy fulfill the demands of the horizontal relationship. 8 This may help us appreciate the different perspectives on justice in Paul and James. In Romans faith alone is reckoned as justice before God. In James justice is faith in action on behalf of the destitute.

The Old Testament prophets found that while Israel was devoted to observing legal regulations, she was devoid of that living faith in God which would produce a just society. The prophets were champions of social justice. The great sins of Israel were social sins— sins against humaneness and the rights of the disadvantaged. It is significant that the prophets generally did not base their case against Israel on specific regulations of the law but on the story in the law (e.g., Isa. 5:1-7; Ezek. 16; Hosea 11:1-4; Amos 3:1, 2; Micah 6:3-5). They argued that Israel had forgotten the story of God's gracious acts toward Israel and therefore she did not act in the spirit of that story toward others. Everywhere there was selfishness and greed. Justice was not done to the poor, the widows, and the father-less, the disadvantaged. The courts of justice were corrupt. The elect community did not reflect the character of her God, who executes justice on behalf of all who are oppressed.

It is astonishing how little the prophets commended individual asceticism or private righteousness. For the prophets, righteousness not worked out in the arena of concrete human relationships and human needs is not righteousness at all. That is why they speak of social *justice* rather than of a private, other-worldly *righteousness*. For this reason we suggest that the “earthy” word justice more adequately conveys the meaning of the Hebrew word *sadaq* than does our “churchy” word *righteousness*.

Justice in Israel's King

The chief function of Israel's king was that of judge. To rule was to judge (Exod. 2:14; 1 Sam. 8:5 margin, 20). The Hebrew word *shaphat* has the double meaning of “to rule” or “to judge.”

Mishpat (judge or judgment) is also closely associated with *sadaq* (justice). In fact, the words often appear in tandem as if they were interchangeable (see Ps. 33:5; 35:24; 97:2; 103:6). Sometimes our English Versions translate *mishpat* as “justice” and *sadaq* as “righteousness.”

Like its companion word *sadaq* (justice), *mishpat* (judge or judgment) often has the meaning of help, deliverance and salvation (Gen. 30:6; Deut. 32:36; 1 Kings 8:49; Ps. 35:23, 24; 43:1; 72:2,4; 76:9; Isa. 1:27). But unlike *sadaq*, *mishpat* is also used to refer to punishment and wrath (Ezek. 34:16; Joel 3:12; Hab. 1:12; Mal. 3:5). We could even say that the two aspects of judgment are *sadaq* (justice) and wrath. 6

While *mishpat* (ruling, judging and executing decisions) was the chief function of Israel's king, *sadaq* (justice) was the chief function of *mishpat*. That is to say, the king was to administer justice in Israel, especially by coming to the aid of the suppressed, repressed and oppressed. In this way he would mirror God's justice.

Generally, however, the kings of Israel did not act justly. Jeremiah sent this message to the evil king of Judah:

“O house of David, this is what the Lord says: ‘Administer justice every morning; rescue from the hand of his oppressor the one who has been robbed, or my wrath will break out and burn like fire because of the evil you have done— burn with no one to quench it.’” – Jer.21:12.

“This is what the Lord says: Do what is just and right. Rescue from the hand of his oppressor the one who has been robbed. Do no wrong or violence to the alien, the fatherless or the widow, and do not shed innocent blood in this place.” – Jer. 22:3.

“Does it make you a king to have more and more cedar? Did not your father have food and drink? He did what was right and just, so all went well with him. He defended the cause of the poor and needy, and so all went well.” – Jer. 22:15, 16.

The king was not only God's representative; he was also the people's representative. God's covenant with David to establish his royal line forever meant much to the people over whom he ruled. They had a stake in this eternal guarantee. The king embodied the entire people of Israel. He stood before God as Israel— Israel was “in David” (2 Sam. 20:1). This meant that the prosperity of Israel was bound up with their king. If he administered justice and acted like God's faithful son, the people

would also be considered good and blessed. If he did wrong, the entire nation was liable to punitive judgment (see 2 Sam. 24). If God rejected the king, Israel was also rejected (see Ps. 89).

The Hope of the Messiah

Israel's hopes for its future, therefore, came to be centered in large measure around the person of its anointed king, of its "Messiah," which is simply a translation of the Hebrew word for "anointed." The people felt that if they had a perfect king, then all the blessings of God would be bestowed upon them in full measure. As we can see clearly in Ps. 72, these blessings would include not only the intangible gifts of peace and security within the community of Israel, but also material gifts—abundance of crops, and prosperous citizens, and fertile fields and homes. Furthermore, Israel's place among the world of nations would be made secure. The reign of the ideal sovereign would bring what the Old Testament calls *shalom* to Israel, i.e., all good, all peace, all blessing, all prosperity, life in its fullness. Israel, in short, looked forward to a return of the original goodness of creation, and the instrument for bringing this condition of blessedness to Israel would be God's anointed king. When the perfect Messiah ascended the throne, he would, in Isaiah's words, be "the shadow of a mighty rock within a weary land" (Isa. 32:2 E. C. Clephane translation). Jeremiah concurred: "In his days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely" (Jer. 23:6).

To each king who ascended the throne, Israel hopefully ascribed perfection. Above all, the king's intimate relationship with Yahweh was stressed. The king was Yahweh's adopted son (Ps. 2:7; cf. 89:26), enjoying a unique relationship with him. He sat at the right hand of Yahweh (Ps. 110:1) and was in constant communion with him (Ps. 2:8; 20:1-4; 21:1-7). Sometimes he sat on the throne of Yahweh himself and acted as Yahweh's mandator (Ps. 110:5). All this was meant to express the fact that the king was in perfect communion with God and that therefore he could be a channel of God's blessing to his people Israel.

Because the king enjoyed such an intimate relationship with the Lord, he also shared God's power, and God gave to him universal rule over all nations. He was girded and strengthened for war by Yahweh himself, and through the help of Yahweh, he was able to conquer all of his enemies (Ps. 18; 20; 21; 45; 110; cf. Num. 23:24; 24:8, 17-19). But again this meant that Israel would share in such victory. Indeed, there would be no evil which could be brought upon Israel (Num. 23:8, 20-23), and the military triumph and perfection of his king would bring in for him an era of golden peace and blessedness (Num. 23:9-10; 24:5-7).

To be sure, none of these ascriptions of perfection, which we have in the Psalms and which were probably composed by court prophets, ever fitted the actual historical occupants of Israel's throne. As we see from the phrasing in Ps. 72, such ascriptions were wishes, stereotypes, hopes attached to the royal office. All were dependent on the king's actually reigning among his people in justice and righteousness and acceptability before God. Only as the king stood perfectly in relationship with the Lord would these glowing hopes attached to him become reality.

With each new king, Israel hoped anew. He hoped that this one would be God's perfect Messiah, the one who would bring in the golden age. Of each of its kings, Israel asked, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" From the time of David onward, Israel expected a ruler who would save his people, a ruler who would restore to them all of the goodness of the creation. 7

If there is one word which most aptly expresses the character of Israel's ideal king, it is the word *justice*. He would perfectly embody God's reign of justice. So the prophets declare:

He will judge your people in righteousness [justice], your afflicted ones with justice. He will defend the afflicted among the people and save the children of the needy; he will crush the oppressor. ... For he will deliver the needy who cry out, the afflicted who have no one to help.... He will rescue them from oppression and violence, for precious is their blood in his sight. - Ps. 72:2, 4, 12, 14.

But with righteousness [justice] he will judge the needy; with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth. He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth; with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked. Righteousness [justice] will be his belt and faithfulness the sash around his waist. Isa.11:4, 5.

See, a king will reign in righteousness [justice]. - Isa. 32:1.

“Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him and he will bring justice to the nations. He will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out. In faithfulness he will bring forth justice; he will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth. In his law the islands will put their hope.” This is what God the Lord says— he who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and all that comes out of it, who gives breath to its people, and life to those who walk on it: “I, the Lord, have called you in righteousness [justice]; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles, to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness.” – Isa. 42:1-7.

“The days are coming.” declares the Lord, “when I will raise up to David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. This is the name by which he will be called: The Lord Our Righteousness [justice].” – Jer. 23:5, 6.

Rejoice greatly. O Daughter of Zion! Shout, daughter of Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous [just] and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. – Zech. 9:9

Justice in Jesus of Nazareth

The Old Testament hopes for an ideal king who would reign in justice were realized in Jesus of Nazareth. God always fulfills his word in a way which takes even his own people by surprise. Yet in view of what the Old Testament repeatedly says about justice, the Jews should have had some intimation of the true character of the Messiah. But Messiah Jesus was nothing like the king of popular Jewish imagination. The message and the deeds of Jesus not only surprised the Jews, but offended their principles of justice.

What Jesus had to say about justice was embodied in his gospel about the kingdom of God. In the Old Testament the coming reign of God was so characterized by the administration of divine justice that the kingdom of God and the justice of God were virtually synonymous. So it was in the message of Jesus (i.e. “Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness [justice]”— (Matt. 6:33).

In his teaching, “The kingdom of God is like this” Jesus should also be understood as saying, “The justice of God is like this ...” How surprising and even scandalous God's justice appeared to be in the message of Jesus! It is a justice which delights to have God fellowship in the great festival of the kingdom with those whom pious society has condemned, while good “church” people find themselves outside, wailing and gnashing their teeth. It is a justice which fills the hungry and sends the satisfied away empty.

Jesus' teaching about the kingdom overturns human ideas of justice. Unless we can identify with those devout Jews whose sense of justice was affronted by Jesus' teaching, it is doubtful that we have understood the scandal of God's justice. In the parable of the prodigal son, for example, we generally lampoon the elder brother as a self-righteous stick-in-the-mud who is so muddle-headed that he cannot think straight. We fail to see that he represents human justice at its best and appears to have good reason to be offended. Was it not the father who was muddle-headed? The younger brother had disgraced the family name, had shirked all responsibility and had abandoned his decent elder brother. When he got what he deserved, he could not take it like a man but came crawling home with what appeared to be very questionable motives. Did not the older brother have good reason to say, “It is all right to be humanitarian? I would be willing to help this derelict rehabilitate himself. But it is absolutely outrageous to act as if he were some kind of hero. He has already received and wasted his share of the inheritance, but now the indulgent old man is going to give him another share of the estate. Apparently my unwavering loyalty and years of faithful service are not worth the flick of an eyelid to him. He is making so much fuss over the wastrel that his sense of justice is obviously biased. In fact, he is so intoxicated with love for his Benjamin that he has abandoned all sense of justice.” What decent, self-respecting person would not question the father's wisdom and sense of justice? Unless we can identify with the older brother and feel outraged by the father's sense of justice, we have not understood Jesus' message.

Jesus inaugurated a reign of justice which is contrary to human justice. It is not a distributive justice which gives people what they deserve. It is a justice in which God's determination and commitment to come to the aid of all who are oppressed is realized. It is a justice which fulfills God's purpose of grace— a justice biased in favor of those who are wretched, deprived, poor and needy. In short, God's justice is love in action. Therefore it is no justice in tension with mercy, but justice expressed in mercy. It is not justice which is punitive, but justice which brings salvation to those who sit on

the dunghill of human misery. It is not justice which augurs doom and gloom, but justice which calls for celebration with singing, feasting and dancing. It is “good” people who cannot tolerate such justice. They therefore find themselves outside the eschatological party, looking enviously on the good fortune of so many reprobates. Thus, God's justice makes the first last, and the last first. It fills the hungry and sends the satisfied away empty. In the kingdom where God's justice reigns supreme there is no hierarchy of religious “big shots.” Here the greatest are everybody's lackeys and everyone works without thought of reward because in the King's welcome and approval they have already reached the pinnacle of human success.

Jesus' actions outraged good society's sense of justice more than did his teaching. His social preferences appeared biased toward the wrong kind of people. For a public religious figure this was not acceptable. For a Messiah it was unthinkable. Jesus went out of his way to befriend the poor, the ignorant, the sick and those who lived on the margin of society. The latter were those who lived outside the law and were called “sinners”. They included shepherds (whose occupation made it impossible to abide by the Sabbath regulations), ignorant Galileans (who had no adequate instruction in the law), tax-collectors (who were renegade Jews in the service of the enemy power), women of ill-repute, Samaritans (who did not worship at Jerusalem) and all the Gentile dogs. Because all such were outside the law, they were counted as outside the holy community. Jesus went outside the camp (Heb. 13:12, 13) and gave these outcasts of society a special welcome to his new Messianic community. He proclaimed to them the good news that they were the special objects of God's justice, and that those who were deprived of the dignity of human rights were to be given the highest status in this dawning kingdom of God. In all this, Jesus fulfilled those prophecies which spoke of the Messiah's bringing justice to the poor and the oppressed.

Jesus so fully identified himself with the suppressed, the depressed and the oppressed that he bore their curse and experienced their rejection. He also knew what it meant to be deprived of justice, as it is written: “In his humiliation he was deprived of justice” (Acts 8:33; see also Isa. 53:8). In all this, Jesus revealed what God always was and ever shall be. He is on the side of all who are deprived and oppressed— so fully on their side that he became such himself.

Jesus mirrors the great surprise of the final judgment. Those who were so confident of having the truth and being God's favorites found themselves passed by, while those who could not lift up their heads for their sense of unworthiness were gladly welcomed by Messiah Jesus. Surely this ought to warn us not to be too confident of our rightness. There is something about religious orthodoxy which makes us insufferably arrogant about our rightness. We are to be pitied if we are so right that we cannot even eat at the Lord's Table with those who are not so right. Luther once cried, “May God in his mercy save me from a church in which there are none but saints.”

This prayer now needs to be revised to fit the real situation, because the orthodox have learned that to be right one must loudly confess he is an unworthy sinner. So we need to pray, “May God in his mercy save us from a church in which people are so confident of being theologically correct.”

The doctrine of assurance too easily becomes confidence and complacency about being God's special favorites. When this delusion overtakes us, we become more interested in preserving our special religious status than in identifying with Christ's mission to bring God's justice to all that are oppressed. Oh, we may offer people the dignity of the justified on condition that they join our holy clubs— which in reality is the “gospel” of circumcision. But the justice of God revealed in his Messiah gives us cause to be afraid of all our religious cocksureness and, rather, makes us pray that we be mercifully numbered among the truly poor in spirit.

Notes and References

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the New International Version.

1. See Anthony Phillips. “Prophecy and Law,” in Richard Coggins. Anthony Phillips and Michael Knibb. eds. *Israel's Prophetic Tradition: Essays in Honour of Peter R. Ackroyd* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 220-24.
2. E. R. Achtemeier, art. “Righteousness in the OT.” *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick (Nashville: Abingdon Press. 1962). 4:84
3. The story of Abraham is part of what the Hebrews called the Torah.
4. The Psalms can also be considered part of the Torah (see John 10:34).
5. Lester J. Kuyper, “Righteousness and Salvation,” *Scottish journal of Theology* 30, no. 3: 241.
6. See Stephen Charter Mott, *Biblical Ethics and Social Change* (New York: Oxford University Press. 1982). p. 63 See especially n. 6.
7. Paul J. and Elizabeth Achtemeier, *The Old Testament Roots of Our Faith* (Philadelphia. Fortress Press. 1979), pp. 100-101.

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The Christian

VERDICT

Essays 6, 7 and 8

1983

The Scandal of God's Justice- Part 3

Essay 8, pages 25- 41

Robert D. Brinsmead

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Essay 8, 1983

Introduction

In the previous two issues of *Verdict* we defined justice— first, as it relates to God and, second, as it relates to his people. The principal task of this issue is to understand how God's justice was disclosed in the gospel event of Jesus Christ. This will lead to a re-examination of the doctrine of the atonement and will raise some of the most sensitive issues in the history of Western theology. In order to emphasize the necessity of this bold venture, we will precede our re-examination of the doctrine of the atonement with a discussion on the downfall of Western Christianity.

The Downfall of Western Christianity

We are living in an era of change— rapid, cataclysmic change. As one author declares, “All the certainties of the industrial society in which we live are disintegrating. We are witnessing an erosion of ideologies, economic theories, and traditional culture.” 1 Indeed, we are witnessing the decay and disintegration of Western civilization.

The church, as we have known it, is more an expression and institution of Western civilization than we generally realize. It will not escape this process of disintegration any more than the kingdom of Judah escaped the overturning of the world order in the sixth century B.C. These are “the last days of the Constantinian era.” 2 Douglas John Hall is not a lone voice crying in the wilderness when he declares, “The church as we have known it, the church that tried to be a 'mighty army,' the church also of the little wooden buildings and the big brick and stone edifices— in short, 'Christendom'— has come to an end.” 3

If we believe that Christ is the Lord of history, then the downfall of Christendom must be seen as the triumph of divine justice. A review of some facts of history may help us to appreciate this.

There are historians who believe that Christianity triumphed over rival religions in the Western world because it was the most intolerant of all the competing religions. Some may dispute this verdict, but no one can dispute the evidence that the Western church has been an oppressive, persecuting institution for most of its history. There is something profoundly intolerant about historic Christianity.

For example, the Christian West has much to account for in its treatment of the Jewish people. For long centuries the Jews were subjected to massacres, burnings, hangings and lootings at the hands of Christians. Superstitious Christians often blamed the Jews for the Black Death, which decimated Christendom. In 1492 Spain issued the infamous Edict of Expulsion, which made more than 100,000 Jews homeless. Christian authorities often forced Jews to undergo Christian indoctrination and to profess the faith on pain of dreadful persecution. 4

The young Luther appealed to Christians “to deal kindly with the Jews.” 5 But the older Luther became more intolerant and irascible. In his

***Concerning the Jews and their Lies*, he advised his followers to eradicate Jewish homes and synagogues by burning them to the ground and covering the site with dirt; prayerbooks and Talmuds were to be destroyed, rabbis silenced on pain of death, travel forbidden, wealth seized, and usury stopped; young Jews were to be enslaved at hard tasks. As a final step, Luther advocated expulsion: “Let us drive them out of the country for all time.” He concluded, “To sum up, dear princes and nobles who have Jews in your domains, if this advice of mine does not suit you, then find a better one so that you and we may all be free of this insufferable devilish burden— the Jews.” 6**

The entire Christian West— both Catholic and Protestant— cannot be absolved from some responsibility for the Holocaust.

Christians have proved just as hostile toward fellow Christians. They have generally been a feuding, fighting family. Christians have often put one another to the sword, to the stake and to other kinds of inhumane suffering. Protestants have sometimes been too inclined to dwell on the oppressive exploits of the Catholics. Yet Protestant historian, Roland H. Bainton, says, “At the moment of its beginning Protestantism was more intolerant than contemporary Catholicism.” 7

In 1525 the Swiss Reformer, Zwingli, launched a campaign to drown Anabaptists. Luther did not oppose this dreadful program, although he refused to propose such a solution for religious differences. 8

In 1536 Melanchthon drafted a memorandum demanding death for Anabaptists. In the same year, Fritz Erbe died after being incarcerated in the Wartburg solely for his religious convictions. Luther did not express one word of sympathy, respect or regret. 9

A few years later the brilliant and somewhat eccentric Servetus was brought to the stake in Calvin's Geneva. Farel was present at the dreadful execution to invoke God's blessing on the wretched procedure. Servetus was offered a reprieve if he would confess that Jesus was the eternal Son of God. He said, “I confess that Jesus is the Son of the eternal God.” But that was not good enough for these guardians of the faith, and so Servetus was committed to the unspeakable agonies of a slow fire. Finally he fell down in the flames, crying, “O Jesus, thou Son of the eternal God, have pity on me!” 10

Beza, Calvin's successor, dismissed the plea for Christian tolerance, calling religious liberty “a most diabolical dogma because it means that every one should be left to go to hell in his own way.” 11

This short sketch of the spirit of Christian intolerance is not a distortion of evidence biased by Christianity's lunatic fringe. It is an expression of mainline Christianity through some of its most celebrated personalities.

As far as historic Christianity is concerned, tolerance and religious liberty are only a phenomenon of the last 200 years. And the triumph of tolerance was sometimes gained, not because of Christians, but despite them. The hated “secular humanists” were often more responsible for securing religious liberty than were committed Christians. Marty's lament has often proved to be true: “The civil people are not committed and the committed people aren't civil.” 12 In the United States the

presence of religious pluralism also helped force Christian groups to settle for religious toleration.

While the laws of the land will no longer countenance the use of physical force in religious matters, the spirit of intolerance is not dead. We are not merely referring to those, like Gary North and Rousas John Rushdoony, who are trying to make, what they think are God's laws, the laws of the land. But we simply draw attention to the various means which Christians often use to control the religious commitments of other people. In a situation in which Christian groups compete for allegiance, numerous people have become victims of mental, social and psychological coercion designed to make them submit to religious systems. These processes of intolerance are more subtle because they are generally conducted with loving, earnest concern for the eternal well-being of the victims. Christians often bring pressure to bear on other Christians for the most, petty reasons. A recent report from China illustrates this:

Differences in worship among believers in so called house churches have begun to surface, leading to fears that authorities may step in more rigidly to control the evidences of revival in this country, according to reports distributed by the Hong Kong based Chinese Church Research Center.

The house churches exist apart from the jurisdiction of the official Three-Self Church, the body recognized by the government but considered by many to be more liberal than evangelical. But now differences in house church practices appear to threaten their unanimity.

Some local church groups, according to the report, insist that all women wear some sort of head covering as they pray, in obedience to the injunction of the Apostle Paul.

Others insist that men and women sit at opposite sides during worship, even if there are very few men present.

Yet others believe they must speak loudly when they pray– a practice which annoys local residents.

One group insists that only one cup be used for Holy Communion, regardless of the size of the group of participants.

“These and other practices are causing confusion and disharmony among believers,” the CCRC report says. “Some go so far as to insist that those who don't practice the faith as they do are not true Christians.

“All this arguing gives local authorities an excuse to interfere in worship services in the name of public order and peace.” the report says. (13)

Reinhold Niebuhr declared that “the grossest forms of evil enter into history as schemes of redemption.” ¹⁴ He said this in the context of comments regarding evils in the Christian church.

In his book, *The Cost of Authority*, Graham Shaw has made the following disturbing observations:

Christianity is not simply a programme for human reform. It is a gospel of freedom, deliverance and reconciliation. It proclaims Jesus as the Savior. It offers men the opportunity of new life and brotherhood. The fundamental challenge of the historical experience is that it directly contradicts that claim. Repeatedly in the church's history the message of freedom and deliverance has only served to sanctify a new system of social control, buttressed by bitterly divisive social attitudes.

In this respect Christian experience has a disconcerting similarity to many modern secular ideologies. The moral earnestness to abolish slavery established the British Empire. The French pursuit of freedom, equality and fraternity brought first the Terror and then the Empire. The search for social regeneration in Italy and Germany established Fascism. Most pervasively, the Marxist dreams of a new humanity have sanctioned systematic oppression and the uncritical concentration of power. These secular gospels have all promised a fresh start, and have often directly appealed to aspirations for freedom and fraternity. Repeatedly such rhetoric has only served to sanction the replacement of one tyranny by another, and provided ancient antagonisms with new sanctions. Some features of Christian history suggest disturbing parallels. ...

Does all the ringing language of liberty only prepare for a new tyranny?

The basic question of this book is whether the freedom of the Christian is self-sustaining, or whether it simply prepares for a new tyranny. 15

In a recent newspaper article on Gandhi, columnist J. Stephen Conn quoted Howard Thurman, who once asked the Mahatma, "Mr. Gandhi, what is the greatest enemy of Christ in India today?" Gandhi's one-word reply was: "Christianity!" 16

The Theological Basis of Christendom's Ugly Face

These unpleasant features of Western Christianity should not be dismissed as simply the aberrations of the sinful human nature which exists in all Christians. Of course, an inherent intolerance in human nature cannot be denied. But we need to face the evidence that Western Christianity has given intolerance a theological basis.

In our recent issue of *Verdict*, "Justification by Faith Re-Examined," we devoted a large section to a critique of Christian nomism. We showed that Latin or Western Christianity made a synthesis between New Testament grace and Old Testament law. Christian existence was thus governed and structured by law at every point. Living by rules and regulations of the religious tradition is a type of Christian Judaism in which the law (or religion) operates as a barrier creating hostility even between Christian and Christian (Eph. 2:14, 15).

But all must now see that the problem of Christian nomism is not confined to ethics – what Christians do. More fundamentally, it is the basis of Western theology– what Christians think. Latin or Western philosophy and theology assumed that since this is a law-ordered universe, law must be the basis and starting point of the entire dogmatic schema. Lutheran scholar, Gerhard O. Forde, has succinctly expressed the law-basis nature of Western theology:

The key to the traditional orthodox position is the understanding of the place of the law in the theological system. ... This idea of law provides the basic structure for the whole orthodox system and so determines the understanding of all other related doctrines the nature of the gospel, revelation, and of course, the doctrine of the atonement. ...

The law provided, therefore, the structure which governed the understanding of other doctrines. 17

This Latin or Western theology, grounded in and governed by the principle of law, has had profound implications for all of Western Christianity:

1. This law-based theology inevitably led to the development of systematic theology. Good systematic theology is as logical (law-ordered) as geometry. In fact, Gordon H. Clark insists that geometry ought to be the norm for expressing theological truth. 18

2. Systematic theology means that Truth becomes equated with a closed system. This is too much like a “God-in-a-box” religion. A closed system of truth results in closed minds. The faithful are not supposed to— and in most cases dare not— think outside the boundaries of the closed theological system. Systematic theology marks off precise boundaries for the human mind, and the fear of crossing these mysterious boundaries is akin to the fear medieval sailors had of dropping off the edge of the world. And if the inculcation of fear of wandering outside the closed system is not enough, there are people with big religious clubs and ecclesiastical walls designed to prevent the faithful from thinking outside prescribed limits.

There is another aspect of systematic theology which increases religious control and loss of freedom. The great theological systems have become so complex that their mastery is beyond the capacity of ordinary people. The task of understanding and interpreting the faith has therefore been handed over to specialists. This has encouraged the development of a distinct class of religious professionals in the church called clergy. Since most theological inquiry is conducted by religious professionals, it tends to become more and more esoteric and increasingly removed from the laity. All this lends itself to clericalism, hierarchism and the manipulation and control of Christian people by those supposed to possess superior knowledge.

William Tyndale envisaged a revolution which would elevate the plowboy to the level of the bishop in the essential knowledge of the Scriptures. That vision never materialized in Protestantism because Protestant scholasticism triumphed over the gospel. Protestantism developed its own complex theological systems in which people eventually were controlled and manipulated by the “priestly class” just as much as they were in the Roman Catholic system.

3. The Christian life ceases to be a pilgrimage. Instead of a venture of faith, it becomes static. It offers a security with a certain appeal, but it is too much like the security of the totalitarian state. The carefully defined theological system and the

overclericalized religious structures of Western Christianity are not unlike the carefully-planned economy of the socialist system. In both instances individual initiative is stifled because the entire system is programmed by the clergy or the bureaucracy. In the church system, however, the loss of true humanity is worse, because control of the mind is worse than control over the body.

4. Truth (with a capital “T”) too easily becomes equated with a belief-system. The question, “What do you believe?” is given a preeminence it should not have in determining how we stand with God and with others. The impersonal “What?” or the belief system becomes the all-important and sometimes the only criterion by which people are judged as worthy of acceptance or rejection.

Thus, a law-based theology is largely responsible for incarcerating Christians in closed systems, making them closed-minded, intolerant toward those who hold different opinions, and easily manipulated by a priestly elite.

Yet today gaping cracks are appearing all along the walls of the classical systems of theological thought. To begin with, advances in biblical science through the application of the historical-critical method have repeatedly shown that the arguments often used to establish systematic theology are untenable. More seriously, the liberating gospel calls all these closed systems into question. They have become as obsolete as Newton's ideas about a wholly explicable mechanistic universe.

A Copernican Revolution in Theology

The end of Christendom means the beginning of a new era in Christian thinking. A new beginning is far more than a new coat of paint on the old theological structures. It is, in fact, a Copernican-type revolution in the way we do our theology.

Instead of making law the starting point and the principle which determines the shape of the entire structure of Christian theology, we believe that we must now begin with grace which was given us in Christ before anything else began (2 Tim. 1:9). The beginning of all things is not an abstract principle of law or election or anything else, but the word of God's grace, who is Jesus Christ (John 1:1; Col.1:15-17).

The idea that we begin with grace rather than with law and make that the reference point in determining the meaning of everything else may appear too simple to accomplish a profound revolution in Christian thinking. Yet even science (to say nothing of Christian history) can show us that the most far-reaching results are often affected by the most, simple means.

We do not deny that grace has always been an important part of every great system of theology. Classical Calvinists have often referred to their system as “the doctrines

of grace.” But without exception, all these classical systems have their starting point in law and then make grace active in the service of law. We now say that this entire way of thinking must be reversed as radically as was the pre-Copernican universe. Grace is the starting point and under girds everything. Law merely exists in the service of grace (see Gal. 3:16-19). This will radically change the entire spectrum of Christian thinking— such as our ideas about God's justice, the atonement, Christian existence, the church and final punishment. It will call into question two elements of the Christian religion which have been dwelt upon with almost sadistic pleasure— i.e., certain ideas about the blood atonement and hellfire. A savage religion can only produce savage people. But before we explore these things in more detail, let us summarize the overall implications of making grace the starting point of Christian thinking:

1. It will mean the end of all systematic theologies. The grace of God is so sovereignly free, overwhelming and surprising that it cannot be encompassed, mastered, domesticated and confined to a tidy system— any more than God can be put in a box. Surely salvation-history should teach us something about that. No wonder classical systematic theology tends to be ahistorical! God's grace in Christ defies all attempts to make it conform to the canons of human logic.

2. The end of closed systems means the end of closed Christian minds and all the stultifying arrogance which goes with them. No more religious walls and ecclesiastical policemen to decree, “Thus far you may think and no further.”

3. The end of closed systems and closed minds means that the Christian life will become what it was always intended to be— a pilgrimage of faith. Instead of the dull security of the carefully-defined religious system, there will be the venture of living in the tents of faith. Abraham must have found his pilgrim existence frightening at times, but certainly much more exhilarating than being confined within a walled city.

4. No longer will the priority be given to the impersonal “What?” of the belief-system. Ultimate significance will not be given to *what*, we believe, but to in *whom*, we believe (2 Tim. 1:12). Faith means living without demanding an answer to all our theological questionings. Faith enables us to live with ambiguity instead of demanding a pat answer for many things. At times we may not be too sure what we believe. When like Abraham we do not know where we are on our pilgrimage, it is enough to know that God knows where we are. After all, even the smart man of the world realizes that it is not what he knows but who he knows that gets him places. Those, who are secure in whom they believe, will not be so inclined to quarrel with other Christians about what they believe.

The Triumph of God's Justice

In Romans 1:16, 17 Paul declares that he is not ashamed of the gospel because in it God's justice is revealed. In Part 1 of this series we gave various reasons for preferring the word *justice* to *righteousness*.

Paul proceeds to show us that the justice of God revealed in the gospel is not a justice based on the law. The apostle could hardly be more emphatic: “But now the justice of God apart from the law (which is not based on the law) has been made known” (Rom. 3:21, author's translation).

The justice revealed in the gospel event is a justice based on grace, and it consists in God's faithfulness to his covenant promise. It is that liberating, saving justice which manifested itself again and again in Old Testament history.¹⁹ This becomes clear when we look at the background of Romans 3:21. The apostle depicts the entire world arraigned at the bar of divine justice. The Gentiles are proved to be such sinners that they are worthy of death (Rom. 1). But then the Jew is also silenced, because he is really no better (Rom. 2). All are guilty. Then God rises to execute justice. The unexpected happens. A “but” intervenes— “But now the justice of God which is not based on the law is made known.” Instead of bringing doom and death, it brings liberation and life.

The contrast between the justice based on law and the justice based on grace has already been examined in Part 1 of our series, but we will here summarize this difference:

Latin or Western Justice	Biblical or Gospel Justice
Definition: Conformity to a norm—i.e., based on the law	Definition: Faithfulness to a relationship—i.e., based on grace
Distributive justice: Giving what is deserved	Nondistributive justice: Carrying out what God has graciously promised
In tension with mercy	Mercy for all who are oppressed
Primarily punitive (re-tributive)	Primarily liberating, saving action

A Critique of the Latin Theory of the Atonement

In the eleventh century A.D., Anselm developed a theory of atonement to explain why Christ had to die. He articulated a theory on the “satisfaction” of divine justice based on the Latin philosophy of law. In historical theology this is known as the Latin or forensic theory of the atonement. The Reformers stood in Anselm's tradition. They further developed the Latin theory by making the law the object of “satisfaction” or “payment of debt” in the death of Christ. Thus, the theory of the “vicarious satisfaction of divine justice” or “penal substitution” entered the stream of Protestant orthodoxy.

In reaction to Anselm, Abelard developed an alternate view of the atonement which became known as the “moral-influence” theory. Abelard said that God exhibited his love at the cross in such a way that contemplation of the cross would move us to repentance and faith. No objective transaction took place at Calvary whereby salvation was secured. The real act of salvation occurs in the subjective response to the cross. There are many variations of this theory, but in historical theology they are all grouped under the heading of “subjective” theories of the atonement.

Before critically reviewing the Latin theory of atonement, we should say something about its value. In contrast to all subjective theories of the atonement, the penal-satisfaction theory enabled the church to maintain the essential element of biblical teaching— namely, the objective basis of human salvation. The church was able to confess that our salvation is effectively grounded in an objective (outside-of-me) event. The Reformation doctrine of justification likewise maintained this objective basis. On the other hand, the Abelardian theory of atonement and the Tridentine doctrine of justification lead people to look at either their own response to the cross or to their inward transformation as the ground of their acceptance with God. The Latin theory of the atonement also enabled the church to proclaim the radical seriousness of sin and God's profound hostility to it.

If, therefore, we are given the choice between the classical Latin theory of atonement and the moral-influence theory, we would have no hesitation in choosing the former. If we compromise the objective basis of salvation in the finished work of Christ, the vital element of the Christian gospel is lost. So let there be no suggestion that in criticizing the Latin theory we are in any sense predisposed to a subjective theory of the atonement.

Nevertheless, we have the following serious reservations about the validity of the classical Latin theory of atonement:

1. The legal explanations it offers as to why Christ had to die and how his death actually accomplished redemption go beyond what is actually said in the New Testament. The best twentieth-century biblical scholarship seems to be reaching the

consensus that all theories of the atonement, including the Latin theory, go beyond the New Testament revelation.

Christ reconciles man to God and gives him peace with God. It is one task of theologians to attempt to explain how Christ in his self-giving on the cross has achieved this end. No precise explanation, however, is offered in the NT, nor has the church officially sponsored anyone of the theories of the Atonement which have been propounded. 20

When we come to systematize the teaching concerning the Atonement we find, as in all doctrine, that definite system is not offered us in the NT...

All serious theories partly express the truth and all together are inadequate fully to declare how the Daystar from on high doth guide our feet into the way of peace (Lk 1:79). 21

The NT does not and could not (as St Anselm and some Reformation theologians did) set forth the death of Christ as an offering or *satisfaction* rendered by Christ as man on behalf of man to make restitution for the outraged honor or majesty of the infinite God. 'Satisfaction' is a concept which has figured prominently in discussions of the Atonement in Western theology, but the word does not occur in the NT. Most of the distortions and dissensions which have vexed the Church, where these have touched theological understanding, have arisen through the insistence of sects or sections of the Christian community upon using words which are not found in the NT: and this is nowhere more true than in the matter of atonement-theories. The NT does not say that God demands satisfaction (in terms either of honor or of debt) or that man (even the God-man) renders it to him. 22

Anselm's theory of satisfaction, consequently, has absolutely nothing in common with Paul. 23

2. The Latin theory of "vicarious satisfaction" or "penal substitution" is based on the Latin theory of law. The Western law court, in which the fundamental task is to uphold the demands of the law, becomes the metaphor which explains the atonement. But this directly contradicts Paul's statement that the justice of God revealed in the gospel is "apart from law" (Rom. 3:21).

The central idea in the Latin or legal theory of atonement is that justice and mercy are in tension and are reconciled only by the act of the cross. We have already demonstrated (Part 1), however, that there is no tension between biblical justice and mercy.

When Paul preaches the good news of a justice which by passes the law altogether (Rom. 3:21) or a justice which is grounded in a promise which preceded the law (Gal. 3:16-19), he is faithful to the teaching of Jesus. In his preaching about the good news of the kingdom, Jesus spoke about a divine justice which refuses to conform to the canons of legal justice. His parables teach us that love and grace do the surprising, "foolish" and daring thing— such as the employer who rewards late-comers with a full day's pay and the father who welcomes the prodigal as if he were a hero.

3. The Latin or legal theory of atonement embraces grace as an important element, but ultimately it is grace in the service of law. This means that Christ himself is really

the servant of the law. His work meets its demands, pays its debt and establishes its claims as if it were the paramount principle of the universe. But the New Testament nowhere teaches us that Christ's obedience was directed to the law or that his death was a payment or satisfaction to its demand. These theories have been imposed upon the New Testament. Christ is not the servant of the law. The law is always his servant and exists in the service of grace. The Latin theory is like the medieval world-view, which placed the earth rather than the sun at the center of the planetary system.

4. The Latin theory depicts God as demanding an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth (Exod. 21:24). Exact repayment for the damaged one appears to be dearest to God. Yet Jesus preaches another kind of justice in the kingdom of God— a justice that does not retaliate but returns love for hate and good for evil (see Matt. 5:38-48). Does God ask us to live by a justice opposite to that which he exhibits in the atonement? Hardly!

In 1 Corinthians 13:5 Paul declares that love “keeps no record of wrongs,” but the legal theory of atonement tells us something very different. In this theory God carefully keeps the score and requires exact compensation.

The theory of atonement based on law and explained by law too closely resembles a commercial transaction in which the scales of debt and repayment must exactly balance. It tends to transform God's love into a coldly-calculating love. For example, the classical Calvinist must deny that Christ died for the entire world on the basis of mathematical, law-based logic. How could people suffer in hell, the Calvinist asks, if Christ actually paid for their sins on the cross? Does God require repayment twice—once at the hand of Christ and once at the hand of sinners in hell? So the classical Calvinist is confident in the unassailable logic of his systematic theology. The fallacy, however, consists in thinking that divine love and grace must submit to such logic—even good Calvinist logic. Such closed systems of theology are no more able to contain divine justice than the sealed tomb could have contained the crucified Jesus.

5. The penal-satisfaction theory of atonement too closely portrays God as a celestial Shylock who must have his pound of flesh before he can forgive. We agree with Alan Richardson when he declares that the New Testament does not say that God demands satisfaction to either his own honor or to the law. 24

6. This law-based theory of divine justice has given credence to a religion which dwells upon two elements in a way that sometimes borders on Christian sadism. These elements, of course, are blood and fire. God appears to love blood and fire. Only the sight of blood can appease his anger. Otherwise it can never be appeased, even by the endless torments of the damned. Such views of final punishment are unquestionably sadistic. 25 No one in his right mind would want to meet a God whose insatiable vengeance dwarfs the cruelest monsters of history into insignificance. If we

worship a God who so loves blood and fire, why should we be surprised that for most of their history Christians have been intolerant, persecuting, cruel and savage whenever they had the opportunity. Even today, what segment of the United States' community is the most vocally hawkish and would be the first to “nuke” the national enemies? Are they not the exponents of a religion of blood and fire?

An Approach Based on Grace

The justice of God revealed to us in the gospel is not a justice based on the law (Rom. 3:21). It is based on grace— the grace which God gave in Christ before the beginning of time (2 Tim. 1:9). The starting point of all our theological thinking, therefore, must not be some static law but God's commitment to lavish upon the human race every blessing in Christ.

By its very nature love is unconditional. It cannot be qualified by an “if” or an “until.” God committed, promised and covenanted to love the world of people irrespective of what they might do or deserve. He pledged himself to go to any length, at any cost to himself, to make them sharers in his inheritance in Christ. Where there would be human misery, need and oppression, there God's love would bring healing and restoration. God would do this because he would be God. He cannot deny himself (2 Tim. 2:13).

We have seen (Part 1) that God's justice is God's keeping his promise. The Old Testament is full of evidence that divine justice is biased in favor of the oppressed. God is one who executes justice for all who are oppressed (Ps. 103:6). The Exodus was proof of that. This act of liberation on behalf of the Hebrew slaves is celebrated in the Old Testament as an act of divine justice. Clearly, it was not a justice based on law and what those slaves deserved. It was based on grace— it was God's faithfully carrying out his promise to Abraham.

This is the kind of justice revealed in the gospel. In an excellent article Sam K. Williams concludes that the righteousness of God

...in Romans is God's faithfulness in keeping his promise to Abraham....

Ultimately, in fulfilling his promises to Abraham, in making all peoples his children through Christ, He is doing nothing more or less than being true to himself— that is, to his own nature as creator and savior. 26

The gospel shows us that divine justice is a justice that is for us, with us, and even instead of us. God is not only on the side of all who are oppressed (Ps. 103:6), but in the person of his Son he has become one with us in oppression. He is Emmanuel “God with us” (Matt. 1:23: cf. Isa. 7:14). On earth Jesus especially went out of his way to be friends with those considered outside the pale of the law and those who lived on

the periphery of society. He preached the good news “to the poor... the prisoners ... the blind ... the oppressed” (Luke 4:18). On the cross he not only identified himself *with us* all in our sin and misery, but he went beyond and endured the ultimate consequences of sin *instead of us*. We do not deny that there is substitutionary imagery in the Bible, but we suggest that it is not so much the language of a legal transaction as it is the language of love. Love is always for us. It identifies with its object. It bears the other's burden (Gal. 6:2).

In order to understand the meaning of the resurrection, we must appreciate that it was the resurrection of the crucified Jesus (Acts 2:37-38; 3:15). Crucifixion was a gruesome spectacle. No one of noble birth was crucified, nor was any Roman citizen put to death this way. It was the most degrading kind of punishment, reserved for the trash of society. Jesus was crucified in weakness. He was an oppressed, rejected, cursed, condemned, spat-on and forsaken man. In this criminal's cross, all smeared with sweat and blood, we behold God's becoming one with all who are oppressed. He takes the cause of all condemned, wretched, forsaken sinners upon himself and becomes absolutely one with them in all their deprivation and oppression.

When God raised Jesus from the dead, he showed that he was the God who executes justice for all who are oppressed. When God executes justice, he liberates and restores rights to those who have been deprived of rights. The verbal form of the word *Justice* is *justify*. When God raised this oppressed Man to his own right hand, he thereby justified him— he did him justice and kept his promise that he would deliver the oppressed.

The resurrection, therefore, was the triumph of divine justice over all human oppression summed up in this Oppressed One who was the one for, with, and instead of the many. He was one with us in all our oppression in order that we might become one with him in his resurrection and justification. “He ... was raised to life for our justification” (Rom. 4:25). The resurrection was therefore the triumph of divine justice over our sin, alienation, deprivation and death. This triumph of divine justice in the resurrection is the triumph of unconditional love. There is no one so cursed, forsaken and oppressed but may not hear this good news that death itself is vanquished and that God has executed his liberating justice for everyone in the raising of Christ.

Instead of trying to develop a theory of the atonement in the framework of some philosophy of law, we have placed it in the historical-redemptive framework of the Bible. In this way we are able to preserve its essential objectivity. It is as objective and as unalterable as the Battle of Waterloo. Just as an event took place at Waterloo which changed the course of history for every Englishman, so an event took place in the death and resurrection of Christ which reconciled the world to God and inaugurated the new history of man in Jesus Christ.

We are mindful that this leaves many questions unanswered. The Bible proclaims what God has done to save us but does not answer our questions about why he did what he did except that his love called him that way. Yet why should we expect God's most glorious deed to be subjected to all kinds of rationalistic explanations? We do not wonder and stand in awe before miracles which can easily be explained. To live by faith means to live with unanswered questions. The propensity to insist on answering too many questions has burdened Christians with complex systems of theology and given them too many issues over which to fight and feud.

It may be considered certain, therefore, that in Rom. 3:25. Paul indeed regards the death of Jesus as a sacrifice of atonement and sees in it precisely God's saving righteousness at work. But it is a free, "foolish" activity of God (1 Cor. 1:21), and it is completely foreign to Paul to describe the activity of God as in any way a necessary activity, the necessity of which was explainable and to which God *had* to submit. Anselm's theory of satisfaction, consequently, has absolutely nothing in common with Paul, and Rom. 3:25f. conforms in every respect to the Pauline proclamation. Paul does not intend to explain God's activity or to deprive it of its foolish character by making it intelligible in this text either. Rather, he wants only to proclaim and to testify what God *has* done and what impelled God to do it.

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25. See Edward William Fudge, *The fire That Consumes: A Biblical and Historical Study of Final Punishment* (Fallbrook, Calif.: Verdict Publications, 1982)
26. Sam K. Williams, "The Righteousness of God' in Romans," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 99, no.2 (June 1980): 265, 290.

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