

A Matter of Justice

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As churches seek to serve Christ and harvest the resources to sustain their mission, it is important to acknowledge our social, political, and economic climate. In the midst of a harsh recession, the nature of public discourse in America reminds us again and again that we live in a divided country. If you walked into a crowded restaurant and simply shouted “MSNBC” or “Fox News,” it is safe to assume that this would provoke a number of sarcastic responses. Much of the shouting on cable news and in the blogosphere is counterproductive to good public policy and healthy debate over the substantive issues facing our cities, states, nation, and world. While the Internet and proliferation of media outlets have undoubtedly allowed more voices to the table, too often invective and innuendo trump the interchange of ideas. This tendency reflects deep polarization in the society, such that public discussion centers on who is up and who is down, which side has made the most verbal gaffes, and the sordid details of private lives.

Sometimes the discourse ventures into the area of religion, especially in the midst of a crisis. It has been interesting to monitor the discussion of the Bible and Christian theology as we have weathered the economic turmoil of the past few years. The subprime mortgage crisis, the loss of jobs, the debate over health care and tax policy: these are not just secular issues. For all people of faith, such events have forced us to consider the complex relationship between our current economic system and what our sacred texts have to say about money.

One of the topics that regularly surfaces in discussions of this sort is “social justice.” This concept has received a great deal of attention in the last couple of years, especially in light of the recession and the comments of media personality Glenn Beck last year. There are few names in American public life that provoke a more visceral reaction, whether positive or negative, than Glenn Beck. And of all the things he has said, no remarks have been more volatile or generated more controversy than the ones he uttered in March of 2010: “I beg you, look for the words ‘social justice’ or ‘economic justice’ on your church website. If you find it, run as fast as you can. Social justice and economic justice: they are code words. If you have a priest who is pushing social justice, go and find another parish.” He then argued that “social justice” is a perversion of the Christian message, akin to socialism or communism.¹

Many religious leaders were quick to denounce Beck, including those in the Southern Baptist convention, Beck’s fellow Mormons, Catholic leaders, and most vocally Jim Wallis, the editor of the magazine *Sojourners*. All of them suggested that even a cursory reading of the Old Testament and the Gospels leads to an undeniable conclusion: the biblical writers have an abiding interest in economic issues and the distribution of wealth. In seeking to construct a society in which human beings glorify God and everyone has sufficient resources, the Bible returns repeatedly to the idea of “social justice.”

Despite the polemical and uninformed nature of his remarks, Beck actually sparked an important conversation on this issue. Too often mainline Protestants use the words “social justice” in a touchy-feely way, or we do not clarify what we mean

by the phrase, including the content of Scripture on this topic.² Discussions about “social justice” often take a sentimental turn, where we all nod our heads that this is something we ought to be doing, but we are not entirely sure what “this” is. It is the intention of the current discussion to probe a bit deeper and think about the connotation of “social justice” in our contemporary discourse and what the Bible has to say about it. An issue devoted to Pentecost is an appropriate place to consider this topic, since the earliest followers of Jesus gave such close attention to the needs of their entire community of believers.

When examining the concept of social justice, the “social” part is straightforward. When used adjectivally, “social” describes how individuals relate to one another. It refers to our various forms of public life. We say someone is “socially adept” or has good “social skills” when they handle the public aspects of their life with decorum. Conversely, an individual who has trouble fitting in with his peers is “antisocial” and a potential problem to the cohesion of a particular group or society. In the Old and New Testaments, tight-knit social communities are core requirements. The Israelites (*bene yisrael*) live in covenant with God and each other, and the core expectation is that they will stand together in solidarity. The earliest followers of Jesus have a level of commitment that also reflects their close ties and social responsibility to look out for one another (e.g., the focus on *koinonia* “fellowship” in the book of Acts).

If “social” is relatively straightforward to define, “justice” is more complex, what we might call a *thick* term. “Justice” in Scripture means more than punitive measures against those who have done wrong. The Hebrew word translated as “justice” is *mishpat*, and it can indicate the act of deciding a case or the place of judgment, the court. It can also mean “equity,” “fairness,” and “kindness” to those who are poor. Not taking more than one needs. In the well-known passage from Amos, where the prophet proclaims, “But let justice roll down like water, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (Amos 5:24), or in Micah’s famous question, “What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Mic 6:8), the context is fairness and equity in the social realm, such that the mercy of God is reflected in the actions of human beings towards one other. Consequently, “justice” can mean not taking more than one needs and looking out for those on the margins.

Within the books of the Old Testament, the biblical writers refer repeatedly to the Deity as the God of “justice and righteousness,” especially in the Psalms. One of the more stirring examples is Psalm 99:4: “Mighty King, lover of justice, you have established equity; you have executed justice and righteousness in Jacob.” Notice in this verse from Psalm 99 that justice is present when the Lord has established “equity.” Because God’s primary qualities are justice and righteousness, prophets like Amos and Micah declare that it is necessary to work for justice in the earthly sphere, however short we might fall. Within this framework for justice, mere self-sufficiency does not fulfill the mandate from God. It is not enough to tend to one’s own field and leave others alone, as the prophet Ezekiel explains. The Lord will judge each person according to whether they have avoided such wrongdoing as robbery or charging excessive interest, *but also* based on their willingness to “give bread to the hungry and clothe the naked with a garment” (Ezek 18:7). J. David Pleins explains that such passages reveal a “theology of obligation” in Scripture.³ Offering support to others, whether of a financial or emotional nature, is not optional, nor is working

for a society in which all persons receive fair treatment.

In addressing this topic, there is no more comprehensive blueprint for justice in all of Scripture than the book of Deuteronomy. The laws and principles in Deuteronomy, which are the source for many of the ethical conclusions in the New Testament, give numerous and concrete examples about how to work for social justice, or fairness for all persons. As S. Dean McBride, who devoted much of his career to Deuteronomy, points out, the goal in this law is a sphere of genuine autonomy for every individual.⁴ What this means is that each person should have access to basic resources in the society and be able to function in community without shame. Some modern economists have argued for the same goal in our contemporary landscape. Harvard economist Amartya Sen cites the need for “basic capabilities” among all persons, specifically the ability to appear in public without shame as a basic right for all human beings.⁵ It is clear that many individuals in America and throughout the world cannot achieve this fundamental goal in 2011.

In seeking to cultivate a fair society, Deuteronomy encourages a system predicated on justice: “You must not distort justice (*mishpat*); you must not show partiality; and you must not accept bribes, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and subverts the cause of those who are in the right. Justice, and only justice, you shall pursue, so that you may live and occupy the land that the Lord your God is giving you” (Deut 16:18-19). The middle of the book (Deuteronomy 12-26) is a constitution, one of the earliest of its type, which strives to offer inalienable rights to each and every person. Deuteronomy attempted to provide a comprehensive polity long before any Presbyterians came on the scene. The covenant people are to worship only God, the power of the king and officials is limited, and the worth of every person is affirmed repeatedly. For example, Deuteronomy 24:17-18, and note again the mention of *mishpat* or “justice”: “You shall not deprive a resident alien or an orphan of justice; you shall not take a widow’s garment in pledge. Remember that you were a slave in Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you from there; therefore I command you to do this.”

The message of the Bible can be difficult and unclear, as we seek to determine God’s will for our lives today. Yet the concrete advice in Deuteronomy about social justice does not fall into the unclear category. In his speech to Moses, God hammers the point home: “Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. It is not in heaven, that you should say, ‘Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?’ ... No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe” (Deut 30:11-14). There is nothing mysterious about the blueprint for social relations in Deuteronomy: “Justice, and only justice, shall you pursue.”

When thinking about our contemporary economic context, the applicability of the message is worth considering. The justice concept in Deuteronomy does not make room for payday lending. Just as Deuteronomy condemns the charging of high interest rates on the backs of subsistence farmers who made up the majority of the population (Deut 23:19-20), unfair loans that test the solvency of poor citizens are unacceptable. My wife Helen just went to a training event for Girl Scout leaders at a struggling school in Richmond, and she came home wondering how kids could learn or even develop self-esteem when they have to venture each day to classrooms in dilapidated buildings that lack the necessary supplies. The justice concept in Deu-

teronomy forces us to work for better education and a system in which everyone has access to quality teaching. The justice concept in Deuteronomy means that churches have to continue their outreach ministries, to work tirelessly until each person in our society has a place to go, the ability to appear in public without shame, with a sphere of genuine autonomy about them. The justice concept in Deuteronomy forces us to address the recurrent problem of hunger in America, especially for those families struggling with recent job losses.

Now there is an undeniable tension between our capitalist system and the vision for justice in Deuteronomy. For the engines of our modern economy run on the basic premise that each participant acts out of his or her own self-interest. Whoever makes the best product at the lowest price does so in the pursuit of profit. This point was made most famously by Adam Smith in his landmark work, *The Wealth of Nations*: “It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest. We address ourselves not to their humanity but to their self-love, and never talk to them of our own necessities but of their advantage.”⁶

That the baker acts out of self-interest, that each of us participates in the economy out of our own self-interest, is not in and of itself a bad thing, as many economists have pointed out. If it is in the interest of a seller to make the best product available at the lowest price, the savings from this self-interest can and often do carry over to the consumer. Productivity, efficiency, and a competitive market can lead to better prices and a better standard of living for many people. In market theory, a frequent assumption has been that things will hum along as individuals and businesses get more and more efficient, always searching for innovation and an edge over the competition. In previous generations, economists like Milton Friedman claimed that glitches or bumps in a capitalist system like ours will be rare and minor. Modest self-corrections might briefly stall the upward spiral of prosperity, but the system would always self-correct. Now of course the assumption of unending, upward prosperity has been debunked by the events of the last two years. The recession has forced us to reexamine the market economy in which we place so much stock, both literally and figuratively. It has also provided a moment for reconsidering the relationship between our religious tradition, which calls us to be other-interested, and our economic system, which all too frequently encourages us to be self-interested.⁷

So how do we proceed with this pursuit of justice? This is certainly an ongoing and fundamental question, to be addressed by a variety of voices, and one essay can only scratch the surface. One thing is clear: it is going to take a rebirth of mutual trust in our society, and churches have a vital role to play in this rebuilding. The divisive elections of recent years have shown that we cannot always rely on our political system to build trust and a fair society. The reclaiming of justice will not ultimately be achieved in the halls of Congress or among the President’s team of advisors, but at the local level, in our interactions with each other. As the novelist Margaret Atwood explains in a *New York Times* editorial, mutual trust is not going to be regained if we just sit patiently and watch the Dow creep back upward: “The wounds go deeper than that. To heal them, we must repair the broken moral balance that let this chaos loose.”⁸ Justice is not attainable on the cable networks or even the Internet, but in the pursuit of solidarity with one another and perhaps valuing what we own and have attained a bit less. Atwood wonders whether “things unconnected with money will

be valued more – friends, family, a walk in the woods. ‘I’ will be spoken less, ‘we’ will return, as people recognize that there is such a thing as a common good.”⁹

Of course our model in this and all other pursuits is the life and witness of Jesus Christ. A focus on social justice pervades the entire New Testament, and it is an emphasis born from the experience of observant Jews familiar with the principle of *mishpat* (“justice”) in the book of Deuteronomy. Jesus encourages the giving of alms and sharing of resources: “Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Luke 12:33-34). He frequently casts the issue in eschatological terms: the person who tends to the less fortunate will inherit the kingdom (e.g., Matt 25:34-40, and the separation of the sheep and the goats based on their pursuit of justice). The parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) is probably the best-known story in the New Testament, and the core message relates to risk-taking in the service of a stranger. Clearly, the “theology of obligation” persists in the New Testament.

The letters of Paul reflect a similar tendency. In 2 Corinthians, Paul encourages all believers to give according to their means and to do so following the servant-leader model of Christ. The Apostle declares, “I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair balance between your present abundance and their need” (2 Cor 8:13). Paul’s statement calls the early church to act with a generous spirit, to seek a fair balance between individual needs and justice in the larger society. In the tradition of Deuteronomy, Paul seeks a world in which there is a sphere of genuine autonomy around all of the early believers in Jesus, and every person has the ability to appear in public without shame. His statement in 2 Cor 8:15 encapsulates this goal: “The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little.”

This question of a “fair balance” is a very difficult and contentious issue. In an age of conspicuous consumption, we regularly hear the refrain, “How much is enough?” People of faith can disagree on the best policy prescriptions for achieving a fair society, and neither the left nor the right has a monopoly on the truth. There is need for honest debate on all complex issues relating to our economy. And it is unlikely that anyone is going to sell his or her possessions after hearing this passage from 2 Corinthians or Jesus’ words as recounted in Luke. This would make a person vulnerable to destitution, unable to support and be present for family members and friends. In addition, many on the right have pointed to the need for personal responsibility in how we make decisions. The Bible certainly endorses personal responsibility in both Testaments in taking care of one’s family, exercising common sense (as in Proverbs), and not engaging in destructive behavioral patterns.

Yet as we address the current economic landscape, Paul’s message about earthly treasures is very relevant to the contemporary pursuit of justice and the tension between our own self-interest and “a fair balance.” This passage and others like it call us to question aspects of our consumer culture, to make sure that we provide for everyone in our midst and value the type of person we are in community with others more than our status.

One of the best things about Deuteronomy and some of the other passages in Scripture is that they focus on small, everyday acts of kindness. Very few of us have the resources to be philanthropists on the level of Bill Gates, but we can do little

things that add up to justice. Being present with friends and loved ones who are out of work and trying to ease one another's burdens during stressful times: such efforts help to build a just society.

Persistent acts in the pursuit of justice make all the difference, and this is a regular occurrence in the book of Acts. A focus on the practical is apparent among the first disciples. After the Holy Spirit has descended upon these believers, after Peter eloquently explains the significance of the resurrection to anyone who will listen, the author of Luke and Acts includes a fascinating description of the financial habits of the first disciples. No one hoarded more than he or she needed, and they all looked out for one another. The resurrection forced these early followers to take stock of themselves and their finances and to submit their entire lives to the fellowship of believers (Acts 4:32-35). It was not enough to shout the good news, "He is risen!" The best and most effective way to live out the Easter miracle was to live in solidarity. There could be no greater witness than their commitment to pledging their lives to each other, relying on their fellow disciples for spiritual and economic strength. The "fellowship" (*koinonia*) of these first followers of Jesus is based on social justice for all persons.

During this season of Pentecost, as we face a difficult economy and uncertain future, several important conclusions can be drawn from our engagement with the Scriptures: "social justice" is at the heart of our shared faith, the model for fellowship or *koinonia* espoused by the earliest followers of Jesus still has relevance today, and despite frequent messages to the contrary, our greatest earthly treasure in life is each other.

Notes

1 Glenn Beck, "The Glenn Beck Program," March 2, 2010.

2 The same confusion is not as present within many Catholic traditions, where "social justice" has both encyclical support and there is a broad tradition of Catholic social teaching.

3 J. David Pleins, *The Social Visions of the Hebrew Bible: A Theological Introduction* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001).

4 S. Dean McBride, "Polity of the Covenant People: the Book of Deuteronomy," *Interpretation* 41 (1987): 229-244.

5 Amartya Sen, "Capability and Well Being," in *The Quality of Life*, ed. Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 30-53.

6 Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (Clarendon Press, 1976) [London: Strahan and Cadell, 1776], I.ii.

7 Rebecca M. Blank, "Viewing the Market Economy through the Lens of Faith," in *Is the Market Moral?: A Dialogue on Religion, Economics, and Justice*, ed. Rebecca M. Blank and William McGurn (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2004), 23.

8 Margaret Atwood, "A Matter of Life and Debt," *The New York Times*, October 21, 2008.

9 Ibid.