

*When we established the American Studies Program (ASP) on Capitol Hill, it was designed to be a work-study program for juniors and seniors from the member schools of the CCCU. Students worked as interns twenty hours per week and participated in a seminar program that dealt with major domestic and international issues. The basic principles we used as foundation pieces in our program were Biblical justice and shalom. This was the introductory lecture on Biblical justice used in the ASP for years.*

## **American Studies Program Lecture Notes (September 1985)**

### **BIBLICAL JUSTICE: ITS MEANING AND SIGNIFICANCE**

Theological Foundations Relating to Biblical Justice:

1. God is the ultimate standard of righteousness and justice because they are a part of his intrinsic character.
  2. God hates injustice.
  3. "Being holy" involves "doing justice" (link between worship and daily living).
  4. God desires that we live just lives and he promises to bless those who obey his commandments.
- Two key Hebrew words for justice/righteousness:
    - One is usually translated "righteousness" (tsdq) and its root meaning is "straight" (therefore the concept of a norm or principle can be derived from it).
    - The second word is usually translated "justice" (spt) and describes judicial activity.
  - But justice/righteousness is also related to:
    - Holiness
    - Faithfulness (love, truth, trustworthy)
    - Peace
  - Justice is not an abstract idea to the Hebrew mind, but a highly personal and relational term.
    - Theological: God relating to us.
    - Social: Us to each other.
  - **Justice: "right relationships"**
    - Justice is different than charity or benevolence.
    - Charity or acts of mercy are important responses to human need, but do not involve changing structures that cause the need.
    - Justice involves systemic changes.

- Scripture does not give us a unique theory or definition of justice.
  - There are 800 references to justice and righteousness as a promise or an obligation.
  - However, there are no easy “how to” steps for busy North American evangelicals!

(over)

#### Characteristics of Biblical Justice:

1. The Word of God provides a fundamental basis for human rights – we are all created in the image of God.
  - Implications:
    - This puts limits on our pursuit of national interests.
    - This involves a sense of global interdependence.
    - This suggests we care for people regardless. . . .
2. Scripture tells us that the central task of government is **doing justice**.
  - Implications:
    - Contrary to our civil religion, government’s principal role is not to pursue our national self-interest or protect our individual right to pursue our own self-interest.
3. Scripture tells us that the family unit is the primary teacher of justice values.
4. The Bible tells us that God has a special concern for the poor, widows, orphans, and aliens/refugees – “the quartet of the vulnerable” (Nicholas P. Wolterstorff)
  - Implications:
    - Our political agenda should give primacy to enabling the powerless to be freed from personal and institutional oppression.
5. As followers of Jesus Christ, we must also heed the love mandate when we do justice. Love and justice, our two absolute mandates, are in tension and that tension helps us to know what God expects us to do.
  - a. Love demands that we do justice.
  - b. Love enlarges the scope of justice.
  - c. Love enriches justice.
  - d. Love gets direction from justice.

#### Concluding Thoughts:

- The Bible does not offer a blueprint of justice for all societies, but it also does not let us be comfortable with injustice. “It doesn’t have to be like this!”
- Our motivation? Only when we truly experience God’s grace will we really have the right motivation to be a “justice-doer”! Justice comes from a knowledge of who God is and what he has done for

us, not from the knowledge of the law. Our identity must be in Christ, not in doing justice!

Dr. John A. Bernbaum  
[JohnBernbaum@gmail.com](mailto:JohnBernbaum@gmail.com)