
Pro Rege

Volume 19 | Number 3

Article 3

March 1991

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Recommended Citation

Williams, Michael (1991) "Being Righteous and Doing Justice: Modern Theology and the Prophetic Concern for Justice," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 19: No. 3, 18 - 23.
Available at: http://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol19/iss3/3

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A quarterly faculty publication of
Dordt College, Sioux Center, Iowa

Being Righteous And Doing Justice: Modern Theology and the Prophetic Concern for Justice



by Michael Williams

Isaiah 1:18 has provided and will continue to provide a text for the church's preaching on the sovereignty of grace and the forgiveness of sin through the sacrifice of God's promised Messiah. But how many of us are familiar with the larger context of Isaiah's statement of forgiveness?

(15) When you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide my eyes from you; even if you offer many prayers, I will not listen. Your hands are full of blood; (16) wash and make yourselves clean. Take away your evil deeds out of my sight! Stop doing wrong, (17) learn

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to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow. (18) "Come now, let us reason together," says the LORD. "Though your sins are as scarlet, they shall be white as snow; though they are as red as crimson, they shall be like wool. (19) If you are willing and obedient, you will eat the best from the land; (20) but if you resist and rebel, you will be devoured by the sword." For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.

The book of Isaiah begins with a prophecy concerning the ruin of Judah (chapters 1-5). For all of Judah's sacrifices to the LORD, for all of her solemn liturgies, her religious feasts, and devout posturings before the LORD in prayer, Judah had systematically subverted the covenant by denying justice and refusing to show mercy. In light of such developments, Isaiah proclaims that Judah is no better than Gomorrah of old.

A key element of the message of Isaiah, and indeed of all the Old Testament prophets, can be stated in one simple exhortation: "Seek justice!" The days of Israel's political decline and exile were also days of great spiritual decline and social injustice. The prophets witnessed the social evils of Israel brought about by her arrogance, spiritual idolatry, and adultery. They responded not with a pessimistic shrug, but with a shout of anger. They said that Israel was trampling on justice, turning it upside down, and turning it to wormwood.

The prophets saw that the practice of justice was intimately connected with the knowledge of God. If God is utterly righteous and holy, he will accept nothing less than covenantal faithfulness among the people he has chosen as his redemptive and

revelatory vehicles in the world. Righteousness is simply not possible without the active pursuit of justice. As the parallelism of Isaiah 5:7 so eloquently puts it: "And he looked for justice, but saw bloodshed; for righteousness, but heard cries of distress." While righteousness and justice are not synonyms, they are inextricably intertwined. Simply put, justice must be done in a given situation if people and circumstances are to be restored to righteousness.

Just as in the times of the prophets, we modern Christians have sometimes divorced the believer's spiritual status from his conduct. We have separated being righteous from doing justice. In fact, we think of the two as disconnected. We have been taught to think of our righteousness in purely passive terms: we are its recipients rather than its active proponents. We consider righteousness as a state of being, something that is simply done to us, rather than a goal for our pursuit. Justice, on the other hand, we think of as something we actively pursue and effect. As such, we understand it as unrelated to righteousness. In short, we have given less credit to ethical action than to spiritual status. We often view the former as optional or as nonessential to the Christian life. We do not include social or political activism as part of the gospel or a normative Christian response to the world. What we miss here, however, is the overwhelming extent to which the Old Testament prophets, and the entire New Testament after them, interwove seeking justice—our obedient response to God in the social, legal, and political spheres—with God's redemptive activity.

How is it that we have found it so easy to ignore seeking justice in our pursuit of religiosity? The prophets zeroed in on many trends and sins within the life of Israel that caused injustice. A list would include such things as selfishness, military ambition, just plain greed, and a covenantal arrogance that assumes that because Yahweh is our God, we must be doing okay. In their indictment of an Israel grown fat on the suffering of the less fortunate within her society, the prophets rejected the idea that life can be compartmentalized, that Yahweh is concerned only about part of life, particular places, and particular times. Up until the Exile, Israel increasingly reduced the sovereignty of Yahweh. His lordship over creation, so forcefully articulated by Moses and those who followed during the period

of conquest, was reduced to little more than a lordship over cultic ceremony.

One cannot help but notice the close relationship between acting justly and a healthy cultus in the prophetic mind in Israel. Again and again we read of the prophets rejecting the popular idea that religious observance satisfied and exhausted the demands of righteousness. Cultus (church attendance, in our parlance) came between justice and righteousness. Israel reduced religion to mere temple observance. As cultus replaced justice in the sinful Hebrew mind, so church attendance and related cultic activities have replaced the pursuit of justice, the seeking after the kingdom, in the Christian mind.

Christianity is not about getting out of this world to get to God, but about realizing God's rule within the world.

The Eclipse of Justice

As the prophets understood and employed the ideas, righteousness is conformity to a standard or norm, while justice is bringing historical realities into conformity with the norm. While never questioning the grounding of religious righteousness in divine gratuity, the prophets maintained that showing mercy to the alien, the orphan, and the widow (a recurrent trinity in the prophets), releasing the oppressed, and seeking justice in the courts cannot be separated from righteousness. Failure to do justice will reap judgment, a judgment that could include being expelled from the land, and even cut off from the people of God. Isaiah 1:18-20 promises redemption but only if Israel walks in the way of God. Isaiah 58 declares the way of the righteous God of Israel to be one of seeking justice. When one has acted justly, which Isaiah there defines as actively removing oppression, one will *then* find true personal healing. The *then* is repeated three times in vs. 8-11. Seek justice, and *then* you will be righteous, and the glory of God will be your protection. Seek justice, and *then* the LORD will hear your prayers. Seek justice, and *then* you will be a light to the nations.

How could a message written so clearly and forcefully, a message written in such large letters throughout the prophets, and indeed throughout the

entire Old Testament, become so utterly lost by many contemporary Christians? Seeking after justice, and its intrinsic relationship to righteousness, has been largely eclipsed whenever Christians reduce redemption to saving individual souls for an eternal life in heaven.

How has this eclipse of justice come about? Let us look at elements within both the liberal and conservative wings of the church that have blunted the biblical association of being righteous and seeking justice. A good place to begin to get a handle on liberal subjectivism is the Wellhausen theory of the documentary origins of the Pentateuch in the 1880s. Following a Hegelian-evolutionary approach to religion, Wellhausen posited the Exodus as the formative beginning of Israelite faith. According to Wellhausen, only later did the Hebrews extrapolate a myth of cosmic origins from the redemptive event of the Exodus. This thesis elevated Exodus over Genesis, the birth of a particular human tribal consciousness above cosmic creation, and surrendered the question of origins and the nature of created reality to autonomous and therefore secular analysis.

The hand of God was no longer to be found in nature, and the Christian revelational scope was diminished to the realm of history, a realm energized and directed by the development of moral consciousness. Cast into almost simplistic terms, the idea here was not far afield from the easy moralisms of the "Star Trek" TV series. As human beings evolve, their primal, survival instincts are slowly replaced with higher, "moral" instincts. The primitive bestial impulse is increasingly understood as "sin" in the process of moral development. Within the terms of Christian theology, the end point of moral consciousness was identified with the New Testament teaching of the kingdom of God. Under the impulse of the optimistic evolutionary thought of the nineteenth-century, the liberal church saw its task as ushering in the kingdom by means of a social gospel that sought to root out sin in the social structures that institutionalized and thus legitimated the "lower," bestial historical impulses.

But the Hegelian *Zeitgeist* was short-lived. The optimistic evolutionism of European theology fell an early victim to the fires that raged across that continent between 1914 and 1918, and was superseded by the Crisis theologian's attempts to rescue the Deity and fashion a new abode for him in the human heart. Shorn of nature and of history,

God was banished to human subjectivity. The revelational horizon of the Christian religion was thereby further reduced to merely the Christic, the soteric, and the ecclesiastical, where God was thought safe from all critical query. Of course, we could take this story down other roads, say a path that begins with Kant and makes stops at Feuerbach and Schleiermacher, but the destination would be the same: religion has less to do with what takes place in the world than with the mental states and dispositions of the religious believer.

As for orthodoxy's part in this tale, the subjectivism of John Wesley, the marriage of Reformed theology to Idealistic philosophy, or the historical retreat of American evangelicals from positive social concern when faced with a liberalism that espoused a purely "social gospel" are all relevant here, but let me take what is for me the better known path, especially because it is a path that enlightens aspects of the eclipse of prophetic justice that are distinctly evangelical. The reader of C.I. Scofield's original *Reference Bible* will find an amazing comment in his introduction to the book of Psalms. There Scofield writes:

The imprecatory Psalms are the cry of the oppressed in Israel for justice—a cry appropriate and right in the earthly people of God, and based upon a distinct promise in the Abrahamic Covenant . . . ; but a cry unsuited to the church, a heavenly people who have taken their place with a rejected and crucified Christ

The fundamentalist reduces the Christian religion exactly as liberal theology does. The difference is merely one of definition. Where liberal theology speaks of Christianity in terms of a normless ethic, an ethic that absolutizes the status quo (as Albert Schweitzer correctly pointed out), fundamentalism talks about securing one's eternal life in heaven, saving individual souls out of a corrupt earthly polity. In the long run, liberal culture-Christianity is really no different than fundamentalist otherworldly Christianity. They both secularize present existence. Christianity has nothing to do with this-worldly existence for the fundamentalist. It does not address, nor is it appropriate to life in the earthly realm.

The revivalist, otherworldly, individualist ethos is still extremely strong. Ask a Sunday School class what the word "glory" means and you will get a reply like "spiritual." Press for a definition of

“spiritual” and in the end you will have something close to “invisible.” In fact, a study of the word “glory” reveals a fairly diverse and rich semantic field in Scripture, but one of its major meanings, in both testaments, is the presencing of God—almost the exact opposite of “invisible.” Ask that same Sunday School class for a list of Christian virtues and you are likely to receive a list of psychological dispositions, mental states that may or may not affect one’s conduct in the world.

Many modern Evangelicals who have been influenced by fundamentalist thought believe that Christianity is about some other place and how we get from here to there. Classic dispensationalist, revivalist Baptist, and Pentecostal theology follow the fundamentalist tendency to limit the Christian revelational horizon to the “spiritual life” of the individual believer and to participation in a transcendent realm. To the extent that Reformed Christians participate in the larger evangelical subculture, they too come under the impress of fundamentalist individualism and otherworldliness.

While we may speak of this then as a “fundamentalist” problem, that does not permit the Reformed Christian simply to dismiss the issue. We have been affected by American revivalist and fundamentalist thought forms to a much greater degree than we are usually willing to acknowledge. Within Reformed circles we speak of religion as being concerned with all things. Religion cannot be reduced to any one realm or sphere of human endeavor because God is the sovereign Lord of all of his works, and human beings are responsible to the divine rule in the totality of their existence. But the Reformed commitment to a comprehensive divine rule is in danger of encroachment by fundamentalist reductions of the gospel.

The fundamentalist has secularized his environment as surely as has the liberal. The later is simply more honest about it. The fundamentalist tendency to define salvation as an identification with, and participation in, a transcendent realm leads to an understanding of the believer as being metaphysically separated from any this-worldly concern. This is the significance of Scofield’s comment. His theological commitments dictated that neither salvation nor acquiring holiness depends upon behavior. The prophetic understanding could not have been more different. Holiness for Israel was not a merely personal or spiritual matter. On the contrary, it

had very practical implications. I would contend contra Scofield, that the situation remains unchanged under the new covenant. For example, all the imperatives of the book of Philippians are cast in the second person plural. Paul repeatedly asserts in the Pastorals that we live our lives in the public domain, and thus we slander or vindicate the presence of God with his people through our conduct. Seldom do we think of Christian holiness in terms of such things as generosity to the poor, justice for laborers, integrity in business, considerate behavior to other people, equality before the law for immigrants, and honest trading practices. Even when we do understand holiness in these

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terms, our deeds may not always reflect our words. Christopher Wright notes that this list, taken from Leviticus 19, is grounded in the very character of God. “Be holy because I the LORD your God, am holy” (Lev. 19:2). He concludes: “And all through the chapters runs the refrain: ‘I am the LORD’, as if to say, ‘This is what I require of you because it is what I myself would do’” (*An Eye for an Eye*, p.27).

The Eclipse of the Church

Isaiah 1:10-17 presents the declaration of the LORD against the cultus of the rebellious nation. True religion is not about animal sacrifices, incense, or feasts. Rather, it is about doing right, seeking justice, aiding the oppressed, the orphaned, and the widowed. The bloody sacrifices of an Israel without justice has become a burden to the LORD. He will no longer look upon or hear the prayer of the unjust. Amos 5:21-23 states the anger of the LORD in even harsher language:

I hate, I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your assemblies. Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Though you bring choice fellowship offerings, I will have no regard for

them. Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps.

What does the LORD require if not mere religious observance? Micah asks the very same question and without hesitation answers: "To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8). Likewise, Amos pleads: ". . . let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never ending stream" (Amos 5:24). Clearly cultus is no replacement for justice (Micah 3:8-11). One cannot argue that Micah and Amos describe only the old covenant, for Jesus repeats the identical concern in Matthew 23:23-24:

Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former . . .

Yet, isn't this what we see in the modern Evangelical church? We have come to define the church in terms of cultic activity, and our own involvement in it as no more than participation in the cultus. If we have a building and a busy program of activities which fill that building as often as possible, we have a church. The grander the scale and the slicker the production of music ministries and Sunday School, the more successful we are at doing church. But this is cultus, not church. Choirs, Sunday Schools, and church buildings are good things, but the body of Christ cannot be exhausted by, or reduced to such cultic activities and properties.

Not to belabor the point, but clearly Christianity cannot be limited to or delimited by its strictly internal ministries. I do not deny a legitimate place for cultus in the life of the people of God. The prophets were not attempting to trash the sacrificial system, slander the Hebrew calendar of feasts, mock temple worship, or deny the necessity of prayer. They were simply saying that the cultus cannot take the place of doing justice in the pursuit after religious righteousness. Cultus is meant to support, nurture, and inspire the life of faith. The prophetic references to the Sabbath are interesting in this regard. Amos mocks the unscrupulous businessman who sees the Sabbath as encroaching upon his opportunities to make larger profits (Amos 8:4-6). Isaiah 58, a chapter which unmercifully

denounces cultus without justice, is equally insistent that the joy of the LORD is still to be found in Sabbath-keeping (Is. 58:13-14). Religion is not merely cultus, church attendance, and participation in the church's internal ministries. Rather, religion is all of life. Worship is the life-support system that anchors the life of service in the transcendent.

The Christian life is not a replacement for life in the world. One does not find an alternative universe within the Bible, a universe that provides us with an excuse for not dealing with this-worldly concerns. Quite the contrary, the prophetic message, and indeed that of all scripture, is about conforming our values and actions to the will of God: ". . . on earth as it is in heaven." Our worship is to facilitate that transformation of values. In short, Christianity is not about getting out of this world to get to God but about realizing God's rule within the world.

The Remarriage of Faith and Action

How do we rediscover the biblical connection between faith and action, between being righteous and doing justice? Evangelicalism has nearly lost this connection, but it desperately needs to recover it if it truly is to be a prophetic voice in modern society, if it truly is to be able to evaluate its culture and not merely legitimate a cultural status quo by means of a religious imprimatur. How do we undo the theological mistakes of the past, mistakes that are as old as the Old Testament Israelites?

First of all, we must listen anew to the Word of God. Perhaps we Reformed Christians have allowed ourselves to become so caught up by the doctrine of the sovereignty of God's grace that we have failed to take Scripture seriously when it affirms not only that grace is sovereign but also that it is allied with positive action on our part. Perhaps we have bought into an overly facile dichotomy between personal salvation and social concern. Amos 5:6, 14-15, for example, claims that God offers life not only to those who seek him, but also to those who strive to do good and establish justice in the gate. These same themes are to be found in New Testament books such as the Gospel of Matthew and the Epistle of James.

Christianity is about more than cultus. It is about

more than making the redeemed *feel* redeemed. How often we have heard sermons on the splendid words of Isaiah 1:18:

“Come now, let us reason together,” says the LORD. “Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be as red as crimson, they shall be like wool.”

Yet how seldom we have heard the slightest word on Isaiah 58, or even the verses immediately adjacent to Isaiah 1:18. We must begin to proclaim “the *whole* counsel of God” so that we may begin to break down the reductionisms of the theological traditions of the past. It was a reductionism that spurred the prophets to righteous indignation on behalf of Yahweh, for that which Israel neglected was Yahweh’s kingly rule over every area of Israel’s life. By limiting the LORD’s sovereignty to the cult, Israel was saying that Yahweh is no more than a tribal and territorial god. The tribe is Israel, and the territory is the temple.

Reducing the scope of God’s concern and rule inevitably reduces our understanding of God’s majesty and power. Under the impress of the social gospel, liberal theology thought solely in terms of the suprapersonal forces of sin which retard some evolutionary movement toward moral consciousness. This god is less than personal, and cer-

tainly less than available for those who would call upon him. The god of Schleiermacher reigns over nothing but human feelings, is indistinguishable from those feelings, and thus may be nothing more than those feelings. The god of the personalist-spiritualist tradition is likewise a little “g” god, for it is a god too weak to create and care for the world of rocks and trees, people and nations. This god is not the LORD of creation. He is not the maker of heaven and earth, but merely a god of rescue, a deity who mans a redemptive lifeboat. He saves people from a world he never made. The territory over which he reigns is nothing more than the human soul.

So long as our gospel consists merely of personal salvation yet ignores the totality of human relationships, all the way from personal to societal to cosmic, we will have a truncated, incomplete gospel, a gospel that may not be completely false, but is most certainly less than wholly true. The prophets aligned the active pursuit of justice with the very character and covenant love of God because they understood that when we limit religion to cultus, and consequently ignore seeking after justice, or make it an option, we in fact limit the sovereignty of God to a prescribed territory, and thus we adopt a tribal god in place of the God of Scripture.