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Otto William Heick

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JUSTIFICATION AND JUSTICE

Another Response

Otto W. Heick

Like George O. Evenson, I would like to express some critical thoughts on Oscar Arnal's discussion of *Justification and Justice*.¹ I have mainly three objections to the author's argument. First of all, in the introduction the author dealt at some length with the "sins" of the Capitalists. His criticism may be justified, but he remains silent on the selfishness, greed, and crime rampant in the labour movement. As an American, I am sure Arnal is familiar with the story of Hoffa and other labour bosses. The labour movement is no means to usher in the Kingdom as Rauschenbusch and his followers once thought. The pretensions of the Marxists are as demonic as those of the Capitalists.

Secondly, Arnal's view of Luther is one-sided. The Reformer did not limit the impact of the Gospel to the hearts of men. In the *Explanations of the Ten Commandments* Luther clearly relates the Christian way of life to marriage, the family, to health care, to fairness in business practices, and the like. Faith, in Luther's eyes, is of necessity active in love. In one thing, however, Luther was different from the modern religious activists who regard themselves as knowledgeable in all sorts of economic and political issues; he modestly said that, being "an evangelist," he lacked skilled knowledge of how to right the wrongs the peasants unjustly suffered.²

Arnal dismisses Luther's concept of the Two Kingdoms as an unworkable theory in our times. I, for one, am convinced that it is a most useful distinction, clearly setting forth the difference between Law and Gospel, the state and the church. Through the Gospel proclaimed in the church, God offers forgiveness and eternal life; but He rules the world by the law of retribution without which it is impossible to maintain discipline in a society including all sorts of criminal wrong-doers. Luther was not a political reactionary. But to expect him, as Arnal does, to have made "effective provisions" for political resistance expects him to be what he did not want to be — a political reformer. Besides, his harsh words about the peasants were motivated by their pretensions to be a "Christian Association." Christians, Luther emphasized, do not rob, plunder, and murder. In the same way, he expressed opposition to Karlstadt's revolutionary measures in Wittenberg.³ Both Muenzer, the leader of the peasants, and Karlstadt,

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1. Oscar L. Arnal, "Justification and Justice, A Theological Rationale for Political Ethics," *CONSENSUS* 4 (July 1978):3-10.
 2. *Luther's Works, American Edition*, Vol. 46, p. 39.
 3. Cf. "A Sincere Admonition by Martin Luther to all Christians to Guard Against Insurrection and Rebellion, 1522," *Luther's Works, American Edition*, Vol. 45, pp. 51-74.

the liturgical revolutionary, Luther maintained, received the Gospel in “a fleshly sense.”⁴

Concerning the issue of political resistance, such two respected theologians as Lilje and Bonhoeffer were not in agreement. As we know, the latter sided with the conspirators intending to remove Hitler by killing him, if necessary. Lilje, on the other hand, was not involved in the plot of July 20, 1944. In a private conversation, he once said to this writer that his Christian conscience did not allow him to kill Hitler. Both men were faithful witnesses to Christ; yet, they differed in their approach to a pressing political problem. Believing in the power of the Word, Lilje had Luther on his side.⁵

Thirdly, Arnal maintains that justification implies justice; they are inseparable in the Bible. George Evenson has already challenged this assertion.⁶ Permit me to make a few additional remarks. By analyzing the word “justification” (derived from the Latin “*justificatio*”), Arnal seems to be right; for, indeed, *justificatio* means “*justum facere*,” i.e., making just. Little wonder that the Fathers of the Latin Church, using the Latin version of the Scriptures, misinterpreted Paul’s teaching of justification. Unfortunately, their interpretation became normative in Catholic theology — man is gradually made whole in the church as a divine hospital. But, as the writer in Kittel’s *Woerterbuch* (Vol. II, pp. 219ff.)⁷ says, the Greek word “*dikaioo*” unmistakably means “to declare just.” It is a forensic term, not a medical concept. This also has been Lutheran teaching.⁸ Justification, as Paul says, is by faith. But faith is an individual act. A corporation can neither repent nor believe in the Gospel; only individual members can respond to the Word of God. Only individual members, in turn, will bring about a change in the policy of the corporation.

To corroborate my argument, here are some statements gleaned from the writings of Bonhoeffer: “Justification is not an ethical programme; it concerns the individual . . . The individual is justified before God, neither programmes, nor structures, nor churches are justified . . . The essence of the Gospel does not lie in the solution of human problems, and the solution of human problems cannot be the essential task of the church . . . The Bible is not primarily concerned with the forming of the world by means of plans and programmes . . . It is concerned with the *Gestalt* of him who was crucified and rose again . . . If the hungry man does not attain to faith, the guilt falls on those who refuse him bread. But to give bread to the hungry is not the same as to proclaim the grace of God and justification to him, and to have received bread is not the same as to have received faith . . . The *Gestalt* of Jesus is possible only in concrete discipleship . . . Institutions and programmes cannot create a just order; the just society can be actualized only by Christians who as disciples of Christ and depending on the forgiveness of sins, are ready to engage in social action inside and outside of the established institutions.”⁹

4. *Ibid.*, Vol. 46, p. 58.

5. Hans Lilje, *The Valley of the Shadow of Death* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1950), p. 61.

6. George O. Evenson, “Justification and Justice: A Brief Response,” *CONSENSUS* 4 (July 1978): 11-13.

7. Referred to by Evenson, p. 12.

8. For the controversy between Karl Holl and his Lutheran opponents about Luther’s view, cf. Otto H. Heck, *A History of Christian Thought*, Vol. I (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965), pp. 323ff.

9. Reprinted from an article by Rainer Mayer, “Discipleship and Political Resistance: Insights from Bonhoeffer’s World of Thought,” translated by Otto W. Heck, in *Footnotes* XI (November 1973): 4. (*Footnotes* is a periodical of the faculty of Waterloo Lutheran Seminary.)