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JUSTIFICATION AND JUSTICE

A Theological Rationale for Political Ethics

Oscar L. Arnal

As Canadians and as global citizens, we live in communities that leap from crisis to crisis. Not only is change the one constant in our lives; it is also a cruel and devastating constant. Especially destructive is the horrible reality that millions suffer not simply because there is change but because there is injustice.

Most people are victims of structures which permit and encourage a tiny minority to claim as its own the wealth and productive forces of the global community. We are told that 113 leading corporations control virtually the entire Canadian economy. In turn, these conglomerates are controlled by parent companies or investment dollars from the United States. Seventy-nine percent of investment capital in Canada comes from United States sources, and such basic industries as petroleum, mining and automobile manufacturing fall under the domination of corporations south of the border. Sixty percent of all Canadian manufacturing is foreign controlled.¹

Such concentration of power and wealth in fewer and fewer hands is fraught with dire consequences. Governments become the indirect employees of this corporate power elite and pursue policies which identify business expansion and profit with the common good. Foreign policy is intimately related to business interests.

Perhaps this is no where more clear than in the munitions industries. The United States claims to be the defender of world freedom against totalitarian communism and chooses to fight its self-defined foe with guns instead of

1. Wallace Clement, *The Canadian Corporate Elite: An Analysis of Economic Power* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, Ltd., 1975), 125-150.

butter. World-wide military expenditures amount to \$350 billion per year. This is over twice the amount paid for public health services, and means that the United States heads the list as the world's supplier of arms.² Cruelly ironic is the fact that in the name of democracy Uncle Sam continues to buttress the armies of such military dictatorship as Chile and Iran.

Should the Church become involved in these complex questions for which experts have provided opposing solutions? Are questions of political justice and economic disparities basic issues for the Christian? Or, are they only secondary matters to be dealt with when the Gospel has been sufficiently preached and the sacraments rightly administered? Can active political involvement be justified as a basic Christian endeavour?

LUTHERANISM AND GOOD CITIZENSHIP

Traditionally, Lutheran Christians have insisted that good citizenship is a proper response to the Gospel. When Luther spoke of love toward neighbour as the appropriate ethical response of a freely justified Christian he explicitly included service in politics as one form of this ethical dimension. In the world ". . . you are under obligation to serve and assist the sword by whatever means you can, with body, goods, honour and soul. For it is something which you do not need, but which is very beneficial and essential for the whole world and for your neighbour."³ A similar position is affirmed by the *Augsburg Confession* (Article XVI): The Gospel does not teach an outward and temporal but an inward and eternal mode of existence and righteousness of the heart. The Gospel does not overthrow civil authority, the state and marriage but requires that all these be kept as true orders of God and that everyone, each according to his own calling, manifest Christian love and genuine good works in his station of life. Accordingly Christians are obliged to be subject to civil authority and obey its commands and laws in all that can be done without sin.⁴

Political involvement, according to the Lutheran heritage, is both secondary to the Gospel and a necessary by-product of the Gospel's reality. Internally, one is justified by grace alone through faith alone; externally, this renewed inward experience is manifested by political involvement in the name of our needy neighbour. It is then completely consistent, from a traditional point of view, for Lutherans to be Christs to their neighbour in facing such issues as maldistribution of goods, armaments manufacturing and the like.

However, Luther and the *Confessions* are also quite insistent on the form political ethics should take. It is here that the traditional Lutheran position borders on a defense of the status quo and loses touch with the prophetic power of the Bible. Luther's defense of feudalism and princely tyranny are a

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2. *World Military and Social Expenditures*, leaflet reprinted from Ruth Leger Sivard, *RF Illustrated*, 1977, 2-3.
 3. Martin Luther, *Temporal Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed* (1523) in *Luther's Works*, Vol. 45, 95.
 4. Article XVI, *Augsburg Confession* in Theodore Tappert, ed., *The Book of Concord*, 38.

blot on our heritage and should be sharply criticized in the name of Biblical social justice. The famous “two kingdom” ethic, found both in Luther’s *Secular Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed* (1523) and in Article XVI of the *Augsburg Confession*, suffers from two glaring time-conditioned defects.

On the one hand, the sixteenth century Lutherans defined Christian citizenship in terms of defending the tyrannous feudalism of the German territorial princes with all its inequities and cruelty. Luther thoroughly distrusted the common people and made no effective provision for resistance to injustice. The same Luther, who called upon the princes to rebel against the Catholic emperor, refused to even consider any alternatives to princely authoritarianism and a social system which he believed that God has ordained.⁵ Whether consciously or unconsciously, both Luther and Melancthon identified the success of the Lutheran faith with the victory of the German princes over the emperor and the peasants. Therefore, the time-bound character of the “two-kingdom” position necessitates a thorough going critique.

On the other hand, Luther maintained the traditional dualism of the Hellenistic Christian tradition. By limiting the sphere of the Gospel to the internal man, God’s created order was handed over to the non-redemptive forces of life. The power of justification was limited to the narrow realm of the human heart; all else was pessimistically deemed incapable of redemptive transformation. Instead of a powerful Gospel, one has invincible evil holding the field. This evil is held in check by the rearguard dike of the law which, in turn, protects that one tiny preserve left to the Gospel -- the human heart.⁶ In reality, Luther’s liberating doctrine of justification is left stillborn and defensive. Justice is reduced to a simple Aristotelian giving to one his due or holding evil in check. The world is handed over to Satan and, in true Gnostic fashion, Lutherans are subtly allowed to live with what they cannot change. The status quo again becomes tolerable, while the justified inner man remains safe under the *opus alienum* of God.

SCRIPTURAL BASIS FOR LUTHERAN POSITION

Taking this traditional “two-kingdom” position as normative, Lutherans have relied on basically two Scriptural passages to defend this stance: Jesus’ injunction to “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s” (Mark 12:17) and Paul’s command to obey the governing authorities since they are ordained by God to serve the good and punish evildoers (Romans 13:1-4).

The first of these two passages cannot be used in defense of the “two-kingdom” hypothesis without distorting its original meaning. Either it gives no clue to our issue, or it states the contrary of the usual interpretation.

5. D. Martin Luther’s *Tischreden*, VI (Weimar, 1912ff), 358 (#7049); WA XLVI, 617 or *Luther’s Works* 22, 94; WA LII, 137; WA XVI, 244; WA XI, 254 or *Luther’s Works* 45, 94; WA XVIII, 303 or *Luther’s Works* 46, 25.

6. WA XI, 251 or *Luther’s Works* 45, 88, 90-91.

Mark 12:13-17 is a conflict apothegm (Bultmann's category) in which a controversy between Jesus and his opponents is concluded by a brief, end-of-discussion saying of Jesus. In this particular encounter, Jesus' enemies try to trap him with an impossible situation. If he defends Caesar's right to collect taxes from his countrymen, he is sure to lose his popular support. On the other hand, if he questioned Caesar's right to tax his nation, he would subject himself to immediate arrest. Either answer would insure Jesus' defeat, and his foes would triumph over him.

However, Jesus turns the table on his treacherous interrogators. He answers their question with an evasive response. His "Render to Caesar" quote is such an evasion. Jesus leaves the question unanswered, because he realizes that a trap has been set for him.

If anything, the Palestinian Jewish context of the saying would indicate that Jesus was subtly advocating the non-payment of taxes to Caesar. His insistence on having his foes acknowledge the image and inscription of Caesar on the tribute coin (Mark 12:16) was likely his way of pointing out the violation of God's covenant by trafficking in coinage with "a graven image." Given Jesus' Semitic rather than western Greek mind would lead one to believe that rendering to God what was His would leave nothing for the Caesar who claimed to be God. One thing, however, is certain. The passage cannot be used in defense of the "two kingdom" theory.

The second passage is not as clear. In Romans 13, Paul is certainly advocating obedience to the Roman government. He goes so far as to call this pagan political system "instituted by God" and "God's servant for . . . good" designated "to execute His (God's) wrath on the wrongdoer" (Romans 13:1,4). Political authorities are even called "ministers of God" (Romans 13:6). Paul, as a Diaspora Jew and a born Roman citizen, would not have felt the tyranny of militarized Rome. He was a member of a very privileged minority who normally experienced only the benevolent side of Roman rule. As a result, Paul firmly believed that Caesar's government would approve good behaviour and punish the evildoer. Ironically, his very martyrdom disproved this hypothesis, for he fell victim to the purge of Nero.

Yet Paul leaves the Christian with some valuable political advice. God does not reject the state as such but rather appoints it to uphold justice in the people's interests. By implication, when it ceases to provide justice it ceases to be the God-ordained state by definition. Having violated its divine task, it loses its claim to our respect, honour and taxes (Rom. 13:7). This position of resistance to the apostate state, implied in Romans 13, becomes explicit throughout the prophetic writings and the Apocalypse. Rather than a medievalist "two-realm" theology in Paul, we find instead an ultimate

commitment to the new eon in Christ and a penultimate loyalty to a transitory state apparatus as long as it is in harmony with that ultimate commitment.

BIBLICAL JUSTICE

More positively, the Biblical testimony has richer concepts of both justification and justice than those usually found in traditional Lutheranism. Biblical justice is not simply a by-product of justification; it is rather one form justification takes in the wider world. When Paul spoke of "justification," he was describing God's restorative actions which, out of His sheer grace, bring creation into the New Age in Christ. Although Paul affirmed the individual's justification by grace alone through faith alone (Romans 1:16-17), he did not fail to include both a corporate and earthy character to this most precious of Lutheran concepts. In Romans 4, justification was seen in the context of a familial relationship, and Romans 8 placed creation's restoration in the context of the *Sola Gratia* of God.

Justification and justice are words used in our Bible to describe God's gracious actions in and through history to liberate the oppressed and broken in every facet of life. Justification -- God's setting relationships right -- claims a wider kingdom than the human heart; it reigns wherever health and wholeness vanquish illness and brokenness.

Justification and justice then are parallel words used in Scripture to portray the holistic character of God's salvific efforts in healing the human heart, feeding the hungry, shattering bondages and establishing conditions for a humane life. Amos united these two terms when he spoke of justice rolling down like waters "and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (Amos 5:24). The Hebrew mind could never conceive of a heart made right with God outside of the context of food for the hungry, a happy family and liberation from bondage. When Israel thanked God, it spoke of liberation from slavery and God's gift of a land flowing with milk and honey. Justification or God's gift of mercy was not simply the experience of the inner soul. It was primarily a corporate experience of an entire people bound by a covenant loyalty akin to marriage.

Witness Hosea's very earthy and corporate description of this salvation and his identification of justification and justice (Hosea 2:19-23): "And I will betroth you to me forever; I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love and in mercy. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness; and you shall know the LORD."

And in that day, says the LORD,
I will answer the heavens
and they shall answer the earth;
And the earth shall answer the
grain, the wine, and the oil,
and they shall answer Jezreel;
and I will sow him for myself in the land.

And I will have pity on 'Not Pitied,'
 And I will say to 'Not my people,'
 'You are my people;'
 And he shall say, 'You are my God.'

Covenant betrothal, justice, good crops, mercy and the creation of a new people -- all this is righteousness; not just the internal disposition of the heart. For Isaiah it is "swords into plowshares and . . . spears into pruning hooks" and nations no more learning the ways of war (Isaiah 2:4). It is the new David who "with righteousness . . . shall judge the poor and decide with equity for the meek of the earth" and who will usher in an age of universal peace where all God's creation will play joyously together (Isaiah 11:4,6-9). Biblical salvation is more joyous and expansive than that narrow semi-Gnosticism that transforms nothing but the human heart and pessimistically waits for some distant eschaton.

It has already dawned in him for whom the prophets waited, in the one who announced the inbreaking Kingdom of God (Mark 1:15). He not only cast out demons; he also fed the hungry. From beginning to end the ministry of Jesus is one of full salvation. In a synagogue in Nazareth he announced his task: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind; to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord" (Luke 4:18-19). This "acceptable year of the Lord" is none other than the Jubilee Year -- that regular interval in Hebrew life when all debts were cancelled and every Israelite was given a new beginning.

For Jesus justification was indeed justice, and justice was justification. When asked by John's disciples if he was the coming Messiah, he responded with the accomplishments of his task: "the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them" (Matthew 11:5). His vision of the Last Judgement (Matthew 25:31-46) describes the blessed as those who fed the hungry, gave drink to the thirsty, welcomed the stranger, clothed the naked, and visited the sick and imprisoned. His own impending death was viewed within such a context of service. He told his followers that the pinnacle of discipleship was service, which, in his own case, involved the handing over of his life as "a ransom for many" (Mark 10:44-45).

Turning away from the sixteenth century toward the Bible is a liberating experience in terms of political ethics. Luther's rediscovery of the free grace of God was momentous, and this concept is an integral facet of Biblical salvation. However, its internalization by Luther led to an inevitable distortion by its separation of justification from justice.

The basic Hebraic character of the Bible corrects this Greek and western propensity toward the compartmentalization of life. Scriptural salvation includes both justification and justice within every facet of life. Questions of food prices, successful crops, war, pollution, rights of the stranger and the like are not viewed as mundane matters in comparison with spiritual or heavenly

concerns. Such a separation is alien to our Bible; all these matters are spiritual concerns. Salvation for the Scriptures includes God's gifts of a good marriage, healthy children, full employment and a just distribution of the world's goods. Without this holistic view of salvation, religion becomes the "opiate of the people.;" with it the faith becomes the gospel of revolutionary servanthood.

IMPLICATIONS

The implications of such a position are clear. Christians do not preach the Gospel and then become involved in questions of social and political justice. Advocacy for justice in Native land claims and prophetic challenging of corporate investment is also preaching the Gospel. There is no "social" or "non-social" gospel. The Gospel is social and corporate because salvation is holistic.

The details of involvement are a question of our corporate commitment as Canadian Lutherans; they cannot be dictated by any one individual. But, a few guidelines might be suggested.

First of all, we might take more seriously our task of servant advocacy. Already Canadian Lutherans have joined other Christians to present briefs to the government in the name of social and economic justice. Lutherans have questioned corporate investment policy and have united with others to defend Indian land claims. This beginning dare not be misconstrued as the full extent of our involvement. At the very moment when certain moneyed sectors of the Church are threatening the withholding of funds, we must increase the tempo of our call for social justice. We must sharpen our advocacy programs and move closer to confronting the disease rather than just attacking the symptoms. In the name of full salvation we must call into question any system which places profit above personhood.

Secondly, the Church must develop a holy suspicion of the powerful elites who control our governmental structures. patriotism, at best, has only a penultimate character. Our obedience to God is to be total and complete because God is loving, trustworthy and salvatory. To particular governments our obedience must be conditional, suspicious and often hostile because the modern state tends to assume a divinity of its own and rarely pursues the common good for which God intended it. In the name of the Kingdom of God, our presence must be a continuing challenge to the demonic pretensions of the state before which we must stand as eternal gadflies. In such a model, Louis Riel and James Woodsworth are better paradigms than Sir John MacDonald and Mackenzie King.

Finally, pursuit of these two goals will necessitate the calling into question of our consumptive lifestyles. The French Catholic existentialist, Gabriel Marcel, spoke of "being" instead of "having." In the western world, including Canada, we see worth and dignity in terms of possessions -- two cars, our own home, a coloured television, a cottage, a salary increase, a freezer full of hoarded goods. The phrase "I need" comes glibly from our lips when what we mean is

"I want." We who overeat, overbuy and overgrasp rarely face the fact that this overconsumption and overaccumulation violates justice and humanity.

How can such a lifestyle be squared with massive hunger and poverty in Canada and around the globe? It cannot! This message needs to be heard without equivocation from our pulpits and church publications. We need to make serious inroads into the practice of alternative lifestyles all the way from decreased food consumption to communal living.

As pilgrims of God's inbreaking kingdom, we stand as aliens in the midst of the status quo. Our lifestyles, our advocacy for the powerless and downtrodden, and our challenges to governments must reflect this reality. The more we proclaim the Gospel through pursuit of these goals, the less we will need a theological rationale for social and political involvement. Justification and justice will have become one, and a great voice will say: "Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away" (Revelation 21:3-4).