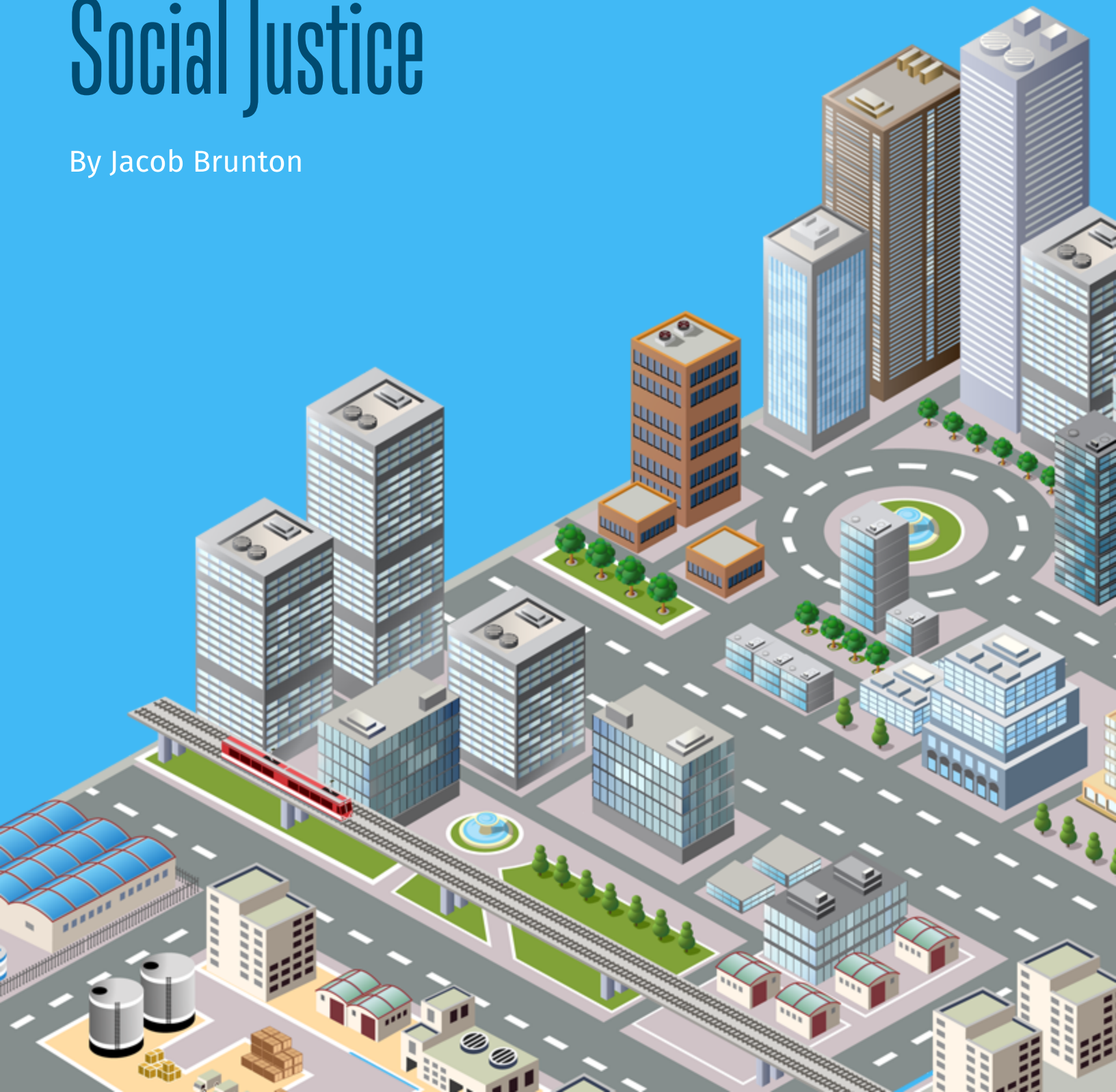
FOR THE NEW CHRISTIAN INTELLECTUAL

Christian Answers Against Social Justice

By Jacob Brunton



About this Book

This work is a compilation of 9 articles originally published at *For the New Christian Intellectual.*

Find more resources at ChristianIntellectual.com.

We pray God will use this book and others like it to restore to Christians an understanding of justice as revealed by God, both in the world and in His written word.

Jacob Brunton

Jacob Brunton (Co-Founder, *For the New Christian Intellectual*)

Contents

About the Author

Bachelor of Theology, Bethlehem College & Seminary in Minneapolis, MN. M.A. in Philosophy, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, TX.

Areas of Interest: Providing a comprehensive and rational Christian worldview, for those who love their lives.

Contact at: Jacob@ChristianIntellectual.com

1

How Marxist Thinking Is Seeping into the Church

How Marxist Thinking Is Seeping into the Church

"Why is Socialism Being Promoted by Conservative Christian Outlets?" That's the question Joe Carter, at his Acton Institute blog, asks about Andrew Strain's recent article at First Things. In his piece, Strain claims that free markets are "as mythical as unicorns," and concludes that government intervention in the market, on behalf of "the common good," is the ideal toward which we should strive.

But Strain isn't the only one at First Things attracting Carter's ire, who also cites an editor who openly identifies as socialist, as well as a columnist who claims that "capitalism is inimical to Christianity." Much of Carter's frustration comes from the fact that the now socialist-leaning First Things used to be a conservative bastion for capitalism. It would seem that times are changing—and they're moving toward a growing Christian acceptance of socialism.

In fact, Jake Meador, editor-in-chief at Mere Orthodoxy, replied to Carter's article defending the rise of socialism among theologically conservative Christians, explaining that Mere Orthodoxy, itself, has "a small group of writers who probably are Protestant versions" of the socialists whom Carter chastises at First Things.

Unfortunately, First Things and Mere Orthodoxy aren't the only places we find theologically conservative Christians promoting socialistic ideas. While it may be more subtle, and less intentional, there's a growing trend among Christian thinkers of adopting Marxist-type ideals for political and cultural interaction. One glaring example of this is the widespread acceptance and use of the term, social justice.

Social Justice & Socialism

Of course, most Christians who use that term would deny that they intend any socialistic connotations, but there's no denying that, in the wider culture, such connotations are taken almost for granted.

According to Michael Novak, writing for The Heritage Foundation, social justice is today understood to refer to all of the following: state redistribution of wealth; equality of outcomes; a collectivistic notion of the "common good," which "becomes an excuse for total state control"—the kind of which he compares to Soviet totalitarianism; and "the progressive agenda."—all of which are essential characteristics of contemporary Marxism.

Jonah Goldberg explains, "ultimately, social justice is about the state amassing ever-increasing power in order to do 'good things.'" It is code for "good things no one needs to argue for, and no one dares to be against."

A UN report, cited by Goldberg, says, "social justice may be broadly understood as the fair and compassionate distribution of the fruits of economic growth." It goes on to explain that "Social justice is not possible without strong and coherent redistributive policies conceived and implemented by public agencies."

Of course, ten minutes of watching CNN or scanning Twitter would make it obvious that the above descriptions of social justice are perfectly in keeping with the way almost everyone in the culture understands the term. It is about collectivistic and socialistic policies which are antithetical to property rights and free markets. With these obvious Marxist connotations, it doesn't seem as though Voddie Baucham was over-exaggerating when he said that social justice is "a Cultural Marxist concept gaining traction in Christian circles."

Baucham's comment was two years ago. We're now well beyond the stage of "gaining traction." Social justice has become common parlance among evangelical thinkers. You might even say that it has replaced the old buzzword, "missional." From Christianity Today to the The Gospel Coalition, to the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the SBC, and almost everywhere in between, social justice is preached as an ideal aspect of Christian involvement in politics and culture.

Of course, I assume that most of those Christians using the term would reject the socialistic and collectivist aspects of it (though it appears that even men like Joe Carter would have assumed the same of First Things, until recently). Kevin DeYoung, for instance, issued a plea back in 2010 for Christians not to "use the term 'social justice' without explanation" because of its potential to carry conflicting connotations.

Unfortunately, not many seem to have heeded that call. Even DeYoung's own clarification for his usage of the term in that article is brief and tepid. He explains that his view of justice is about equal treatment under the law rather than equal opportunity or outcomes, but he is quick to indicate that other Christian writers might have a differing view, and that he isn't immediately interested in arguing that point. As far as I can tell, there aren't many other Christian writers who are interested in arguing that point, either.

If They Don't Mean Socialism, What Do They Mean?

But isn't that exactly the point that we ought to be arguing, if we really do mean something substantively different from the culture when we speak about social justice? If Christian leaders are using a term popularly used by the culture, but mean something fundamentally different from what the culture means when they use it, shouldn't they be laboring to make that difference plain? I would like to believe that these Christian writers surely don't agree with the Marxist connotations of social justice, but it is difficult to find any clear and principled distinction between what they mean and what the culture means in their use of it.

For instance, K. Edward Copeland, writing on "Why All Christians Must Seek Public Justice" at The Gospel Coalition, says, "Contrary to our modern emphasis on individual rights, the Bible typically—if not, overwhelmingly—frames 'doing justice'... within the context of community." (I take this—"doing justice in community"—to be what he means by "public justice," which he uses

synonymously with “social justice” later in the article.) Notice that he seems to see this public justice as contrary to “our modern emphasis on individual rights.”

That’s curious, though. Individual rights, in and of themselves, merely limit what the government can do to individuals; they don’t say anything at all about the need or value of community, or even about voluntarily offering aid in the context of community. The only way individual rights could be seen as contrary to “doing justice in community” is if one’s idea of “doing justice in community” involves violating individual rights; if it involves coerced “justice in community.”

That’s exactly what the culture means by social, or “public,” justice—and that’s exactly how they would frame it: social justice versus individual rights. This is just one example of the way in which Christian leaders are sending mixed messages to the Church in their failure to fully distinguish their usage of the term, social justice, from that of the culture.

Obviously, that lack of a clear distinction doesn’t mean that they secretly agree with the cultural Marxists, and are engaging in some kind of conspiracy from within the Church. It could just as easily mean that they aren’t very clear on the distinctions, themselves. This, of course, would be somewhat understandable for men whose central focus is rightly on theology, rather than political theory. However, there is another sense in which that focus on theology makes it all the more important that we have clarity when it comes to applying that theology to politics and culture. A lack of clarity in applied theology can lead very quickly to a lack of clarity in the theology being applied.

If we want to ensure against such confusion, then as we seek to apply our theology to culture and politics, it will be necessary to clearly and intentionally engage in principled thinking on those issues. That—principled thinking—is the essential component missing from much of this discussion, and that lack of principled thinking has resulted in the current ambiguities.

No Clarity and No Principles

To think in principle on this topic would be to ask, and honestly answer, questions like: "What is the essential difference between what we Christians mean by social justice and what the world means by it?"; "What, if any, role should the government have in carrying out social justice?"; "How does social justice relate to individual rights?"; "What are individual rights, and do we affirm them?"

Apart from carefully answering such questions, how can these Christian writers, who strongly endorse things like social justice, honestly expect their readers to come away with any other understanding of that term than the one supplied by the culture?

But it gets worse: it's not just that they fail to carefully differentiate their meaning from the culture's, which is potentially disastrous in itself. When they do talk about related issues where they would have opportunity to demonstrate fundamental disagreement with the culture, they seem to waver.

Take the topic of individual rights, for instance. The Founders' understanding of the principle of individual rights, as expressed in the Declaration of Independence, is explicitly antithetical to the contemporary Cultural Marxist ideal of social justice. A clear articulation and defense of this political principle—grounded in the fact that man is made in the image of God (Gen. 1:26-27), the command to defend life (Gen. 9:6), and the second table of the law (Ex. 20:13-17)—could quickly give assurance that, whatever these Christian men mean by social justice, they surely couldn't mean what the culture does. But a clear articulation and defense of the principle of individual rights is not to be found among these writers.

Instead, what we find from them on individual rights often contains the same level of opacity which they offer on the topic of social justice.

For example, when Dr. Al Mohler, President of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, writes on "A Christian Understanding of Economics," he begins with affirming the principle of "private property and ownership"—but he then seems to immediately undermine that affirmation with numerous "theses" which are antithetical to that very principle. The most explicit point of cognitive dissonance comes when he says that an economy must "reward righteousness," and cites the American tax code, "which incentivizes desired economic behaviors," as an example. It's difficult to believe that Dr. Mohler doesn't realize that using the tax code to reward desired behavior (and punish undesired behavior, which is necessarily entailed) is the quintessential violation of property rights. If you can be forced by the government to pay more in taxes because you don't engage in "desired behavior," then you do not own your property. The government does. And it is merely allowing you to keep a portion—contingent on your behavior.

The idea that the government can pick winners and losers via the tax code completely undercuts the individual right to private property. It is also the choice method of transitioning an economy from free to coerced; from capitalist to socialist—by means of an ever-increasing number of pressure groups petitioning the government to make them the winner of the moment.

But it's not just property rights which seem to be fuzzy in the minds of evangelical leaders. In a recent video discussion on religious liberty, Dr. Russell Moore, the President of The Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, said that "every right that we have is never an absolute." Such a statement is, of course, concerning for those who view rights as inalienable. However, because this was in the context of answering objections which pertained to the apparent abuse of "religious liberty," some have argued that Dr. Moore really just meant that our rights can't ever be allowed to conflict with the rights of others. If that's all he meant, I would disagree with his wording, but I'd heartily affirm his meaning. However, the ensuing conversation in the video suggests that that was not what he meant. In discussing the military draft as an elaboration on his point, Dr. Moore mockingly denounced the idea that "we all have a golden ticket" which allows us to decline being drafted. But that's exactly what the principle of

individual rights would insist: that the government cannot force an individual to go fight in a war against his will. That Dr. Moore endorses the draft, and that he sees such an endorsement as an example of what he means when he says "every right that we have is never an absolute," seems to indicate pretty clearly that he either does not understand, or does not agree with, the idea that our rights are individual and inalienable.

Less explicit, but equally as disturbing, are the innumerable little jabs and sneers at the concept of individual rights which are scattered among Christian literature. Sometimes this is a result of conflating the principle individual rights with superficiality and consumerism, as Rod Dreher implicitly does when he links individual rights and freedom to "[the maximization of] opportunities for individuals to express and satisfy their desires." Sometimes it's the failure to properly distinguish between the role of the Church and the role of the State, as when Timothy Paul Jones, Associate Vice President of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, questions whether Christians ought to have participated in the American Revolution in light of the fact that early Christians—who "were taxed more heavily, with less representation"—never revolted against Rome.

No Christian Defense Against the Rising Tide of Socialism

While such jabs are concerning, they are, in and of themselves, harmless. In fact, almost anything listed above—from the widespread Christian talk of social justice, to the failure to clarify what is meant by it, to the inconsistent talk about individual rights, to the hostile jabs against individual rights—each, considered by itself, wouldn't be cause for alarm. However, when you consider that the culture is moving toward socialism faster than ever before; that, according to a recent Barna study, "36% of practicing Christians accept ideas associated with Marxism;" and that once politically conservative Christian institutions are coming out in favor of socialism (or variants thereof), the cumulation of these things leaves one wondering whether our Christian thought leaders really are as competently opposed to the ideology of Marxism as we might think. Sure, they may be honest when they say that they don't want socialism, but one begins to

wonder whether they truly want—or even understand—the only consistent alternative to socialism, which is the American system founded on individual rights.

It has been noted by many wise men that "the only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing." If Marxism is an evil ideology, then what good ideology—other than its antithesis: the ideology of individual rights—will be raised up to stop it? If Cultural Marxism is an advancing societal evil, then what good men will stand up against it? It will not be stopped by adopting its language. It will not be stopped by ignoring its advance. It will not be stopped by ambiguous, half-hearted, and half-minded, appeals to the good. And it certainly will not be stopped by mocking and scoffing at the good.

Where is the Christian defense of the good on this issue? Where is the unfiltered, unambiguous, unapologetic, principled, defense of individual rights in the Church today? It doesn't appear as though there is one. The more troubling aspect is that most lay Christians think that the above writers are providing that defense. They don't realize that, whether due to ignorance, incompetence, or apathy, these Christian leaders are paving the way for a Cultural Marxist revolution—in the Church. That trend can be stopped, but only if Christian leaders start seriously thinking through those principled questions above; only if we, as Christians, relearn what it means for individual rights to be inalienable, and how those inalienable rights are grounded in our God-given nature; and only if we stand up in an unapologetic ideological defense of those rights.

2

The Theological Problem with Tim Keller's So-Called Social Justice

The Theological Problem with Tim Keller's So-Called Social Justice

The Church has begun to widely embrace so-called social justice, and much of it is thanks to Tim Keller's book, Generous Justice: How God's Grace Makes Us Just.

There are certainly a lot of good things in Keller's book—the greatest of which is his call for the Church to pursue justice. However, I think Keller makes some grave mistakes when it comes to identifying what justice is, and how it should be pursued. This is most obvious in his discussion about the economic aspects of social justice (sometimes called "economic justice").

The economic aspect of social justice typically consists of some sort of appeal to economic equality, where the sense of justice implied is that of alleviating economic needs. Keller expresses this view saying, "if you do not actively and generously share your resources with the poor, you are a robber. You are unjust."[1] (17) He makes a similar claim in his article, "The Gospel and the Poor," saying, "To fail to share what you have is not just uncompassionate, but unfair, unjust." (19-20)

Justice or Charity?

In today's political climate, this kind of talk might smack of Marxism. But before assuming that Keller—and his fellow evangelical advocates of so-called social justice—are peddling Marxist notions, we ought to consider what else they might mean with this kind of language. One of Keller's major rationales for using the language of "justice" rather than "charity" when talking about giving to the poor is that the word charity "conveys a good but optional activity" (Generous Justice, p. 15); and giving to the poor—Keller points out—is not an optional activity for the Christian.

Of course, Keller is right that giving to the poor is not optional for the Christian. Christians are indeed commanded to help the poor in order to set forth an image of the grace of God. But is this a good reason to refer to that act as "justice" rather than as "charity"? Is the mere fact that something is morally obligatory sufficient for changing its name to "justice"? Presumably not. There are dozens of things in the Christian life that are not optional (e.g., prayer, fellowship, communion with the saints, etc...), and yet it would be absurd to change the names of those activities to "justice" merely because they're obligatory.

There is a traditional category of justice called universal justice which, according to Ronald Nash, "is coextensive with the whole of righteousness, with the whole of virtue" (Social Justice and the Christian Church, p. 30). So, one could say that charity is an expression of universal justice, which just means that charity is part of the moral life for the Christian. In this sense, the Christian's failure to do what is morally obligatory (whether it be charity, prayer, or whatever) would be an injustice against God. But it's clear that Keller means to say more than this in referring to aid to the poor as "justice."

To Each According to His Need

He doesn't merely mean that the failure to be charitable is an injustice against God, in the universal sense of justice. He means that it is an injustice against the poor. That's why he calls it robbery. On this idea of justice, the extent to which someone is poor is the extent to which they have been robbed by those who are not poor. Need, and the obligation to alleviate it, is the suggested standard of justice.

So it turns out that this idea of justice is rooted in Marxist notions after all—as expressed in that famous maxim, "from each according to his ability, to each according to his need." Do you have resources that someone else needs? Then this view of justice demands that you give until the needs are met. If you don't, you're a robber.

Granted, Keller (pp.29-31)—and many other evangelical advocates of this idea of justice (e.g., see Greg Forster's articles here and here)—are quick to note that they don't necessarily advocate for government action in meting out this justice. Though it's difficult to see why not, if it is in fact "robbery." But we can go ahead and take them at their word, since the government's involvement isn't actually the main problem with this view. The main problem is the moral and theological implications of such a need-based, Marxist conception of justice.

God—The Cosmic Greedy Thief

Step back and ask yourself what it would mean if we applied this idea of justice to God. "From each according to his ability, to each according to his need." Isn't God the most able being in all the universe? And aren't we infinitely needy in respect to Him? Justice then would seem to demand that He give us everything we need.

Instead, He makes demands of us. He threatens to punish us if we're evil, and He puts conditions on giving us the heaven that we need. But we're needy, and on this view of justice, that gives us a just claim against Him. The extent to which He does not alleviate every one of our material and spiritual needs—without condition—is the extent to which He is robbing from us. We are the poor, innocent, needy victims—and He is the greedy cosmic thief, who refuses to give us what we need.

It will not do to say that this need-based idea of justice only applies to us, and not to God. The whole reason that Christians are supposed to give to the poor is to paint a picture of the grace—i.e. undeserved gifts—of God in the gospel. By calling charity "justice" and claiming that it is deserved, the implication is that God's grace in the gospel is deserved. So, there can be no equivocation when discussing the justice of God and justice between us humans on the matter of giving to the poor.

Christianity teaches that God doesn't owe us anything. This so-called social justice implies that God owes us everything. Christianity teaches that God graciously gives us undeserved good gifts. So-called social justice teaches that there can be no such concept as grace when needs are at stake; what one deserves is determined by one's needs. Christianity teaches that it would be unjust for God to bring sinners into heaven, and that the death of His Son was required to make it just (Romans 3:23-25). So-called social justice implies that it would be unjust for God not to bring sinners into heaven, and that there was no need for the death of His Son—unless, of course, it was to pay for God's sins against us.

Consider what this would mean for the work of Christ on the cross. Christ was not performing an unspeakable act of grace, leaving us speechless, humiliated, and worshipful. No. He was paying the debt He owed to us for His Divine privilege. We owe Him no thanks. He owes us thanks for deciding to forgive Him—so long as He bears fruit in keeping with repentance, and does not exalt Himself too highly again. We do not come to the cross, broken and contrite in heart, to worship. We come as haughty claimants to stand as judge over Him, and to assess whether His sacrifice was sufficient to assuage our just cause against Him.

The only appropriate Christian response to this is: To Hell with such blasphemy. To hell with the gospel of so-called social justice.

Redeeming Gospel Giving

Of course, Christian advocates of social justice would never say any of those things about God, Christ, or the gospel. But that doesn't change the fact that their concept of justice demands that they be true. So-called Economic justice, understood as owing resources to the needy, turns the true God of the Bible—who very emphatically claims to owe us nothing—into a moral monster, and flips the gospel on its head. There's no way around it.

If we don't want to lie about the nature and character of God in our giving, then we must not lie about the giving. The cross of Christ was absolutely not an act of justice—to us. He was not giving us our due. Christ owed us nothing. God owed us nothing. No, the cross of Christ was a feat of staggering, undeserved, grace. Consider the fact that it must be received by faith alone, without works—without deserving it. To receive God's gift in Christ, we must receive it as a gift—not as justice. Likewise, with our giving.

To accurately picture God's graciousness to us in the gospel through our giving, the one thing we must never do is claim that the recipient of the gift deserves it; that we are committing an act of justice to them in our giving. For the sake of the integrity of the gospel, gospel giving must never be thought of as justice. It's not justice. It's grace. It's charity.

Footnotes:

1 - Keller attempts to justify this claim by referencing Ezekiel 18:5-8, where "commits no robbery" is listed next to "gives his bread to the hungry" in a long list of descriptions of the righteous man. But there is no clear exegetical argument for taking the latter to be the means of doing the former, as Keller does. When one considers the theological problems with Keller's reading to be outlined below, it becomes clear that if an alternative reading is available (and I think there is), then it should be preferred.

3

The Content of Social Justice: A Reply to Joe Carter

The Content of Social Justice: A Reply to Joe Carter

Joe Carter's recent article on social justice encourages Christians "not to shrink from the term nor to allow the secular world to distort its biblical meaning." He notes throughout the article that the term need not carry the politically progressive and liberal connotations for which it has recently gone viral; that it simply refers to justice in a particular social context. Quoting Gideon Strauss, Carter claims that social justice refers simply to "non-political organizations that promote justice." When you break down the word and ignore the whirlwind of cultural connotations, this approach certainly seems plausible.

In spite of this, Neil Shenvi recently released a "friendly rejoinder" to Carter in which he persuasively argues that "Christians should be very hesitant to use the phrase 'social justice,' both for the sake of clear communication and to avoid dangerous errors that can be promoted by ambiguity of language."

I agree with Shenvi and think his warning should be carefully heeded by the Church at large. However, I would like to argue that there are other dangerous errors and ambiguities of language in Carter's exposition of the topic—even if we decided to join Carter in the attempt to redeem the term, "social justice." Over and above the language of social justice, the ideological content which Carter seems to affirm regarding justice and its practical out-workings in society is something which conservative Christians should take serious issue with.

A "Christian Perspective of Justice"?

The first error to notice is Carter's prescription for a "Christian perspective" on justice. Remember that Carter wants us to understand social justice merely as justice in a particular social context. Following his advice would mean that our view of justice, in general, would determine our view of social justice, in

particular. What does Carter propose as the "Christian perspective" on justice? He cites Gideon Strauss, saying that justice is "when all God's creatures receive what is due them and contribute out of their uniqueness to our common existence."

The first part of that definition—receiving what is due—is simply a restatement of the classical definition of justice, which Carter draws from Institutes of Justinian just one paragraph earlier. So it seems that the second part—contributing "out of their uniqueness to our common existence"—is what Carter has in mind as the uniquely Christian aspect of justice.

The first question we need to ask is: What does that even mean? How does one "contribute out of [his] uniqueness to our common existence"? The second question is: Why should we call that—whatever it is—justice? Ideally, Christians should want to be just. It's fair to say, then, that a Christian view of justice needs to be practicable. How would one go about practicing justice on this definition? What is one's "uniqueness" out of which he is supposed to contribute? What is "our common existence" toward which one is supposed to contribute?

It is not difficult to see how this definition of justice could be leveraged on behalf of collectivistic—and even socialistic—policies. The man who has more wealth than another is "unique" in regard to his wealth, and thus justice would consist of him "contributing" that wealth toward the "common existence" of everyone else. When would justice be satisfied? Presumably, when all "uniqueness" has been swallowed up into the lowest common denominator of "our common existence"—when total, stagnant, equalized poverty has been finally achieved.

How else could the Church consistently practice Strauss' (and by proxy, Carter's) proposed definition of justice? Moreover, why does Carter see this definition of justice as a potential conservative alternative to the politically progressive connotations which are popular in the culture?

Perhaps he would answer that the difference is political: Carter's definition doesn't necessarily involve political redistribution, whereas the progressive one does. If that's his answer, then it would seem that he is claiming that conservative and progressive views of justice agree that justice demands socialistic redistributions of wealth. The only difference is that, while the progressive view forces the redistribution, the conservative view demands that the redistribution be done voluntarily. That, I propose, is not a conservative (or accurate) view of justice.

"Biblical Justice" – Confusing Justice & Righteousness

The next error I would like to draw attention to is the recently *en vogue* confusion, generated primarily by Tim Keller, concerning the Hebrew words *misphat* and *tzadeqah*. Carter quotes Keller, explaining that *misphat* roughly corresponds to the classical understanding of justice regarding giving people their due—whether negatively as punishment, or positively as payment. So far, so good.

The confusion is introduced in Keller's treatment of *tzadequah*, typically translated as "righteousness." Although Keller admits that "*tzadequah* is primarily about being in a right relationship with God," he stresses the public implications of this righteousness in everyday life, and contrasts this with a view of righteousness which is concerned with "private morality." The idea, Keller wants to suggest, is that Biblical righteousness (*tzadequah*) is not a private thing, but rather, a very public thing—a social thing.

This makes way for the next move of combining *misphat* and *tzadequah* together to get "social justice." Since the two Hebrew words are coupled together so often in the Old Testament, Keller (and others) take the liberty of combining them together under a new, English, term: "when the two Hebrew words *tzadeqah* and *mishpat* are tied together—as they are more than three dozen times—the English expression that best conveys the meaning is 'social justice.'"

One question the reader should be asking himself is: Is it appropriate to mash two distinct Hebrew words together under a new English term merely because they are often used together in Scripture? Is this an acceptable hermeneutical practice? While my suspicion is that these questions deserve a sharply negative answer, I will set this particular concern aside for another time, and draw attention to a more fundamental concern.

There is a very important distinction between *misphat* and *tzadequah* which is often obliterated in the attempt to blend them together. *Misphat* is concerned with giving people their due. *Tzadequah* is concerned with fulfilling one's moral obligations—first to God, and then to other people. While these often overlap (i.e., one of our moral obligations is to give people their due), they are not the same thing. For instance, as Christians, we are morally obliged to be generous. This is an obligation we owe to God. But it does not follow that such generosity is an instance of *misphat*—of giving people their due. Arguably, if the generosity is due to the recipient, then it isn't generosity. Generosity is a moral obligation, owed to God. But it is not owed to the recipient. It is given, as a gift, to the recipient, but the obligation is entirely vertical. Mashing justice (*misphat*) and righteousness (*tzadequah*) together blurs the distinction between what we owe to God and what we owe to others. As I point out in another article, it also blurs the all-too-important theological distinction between justice and grace.

Rediscovering Justice & Righteousness

Rather than watering down the important distinctions between these two concepts by merging them under a new term, we ought to carefully investigate the way they relate to each other as distinct concepts in their own right. Regarding *misphat*, we ought to ask: What are people due? What determines one's due? Is it determined by need, or inequality, as is insinuated in Strauss' & Carter's "Christian perspective" on justice? Or is it determined by earnings and merit, as in most classical conceptions of justice? In fact, righteousness (*tzadequah*) would seem to demand that we get such questions right. If we get justice (*misphat*) wrong, then we will not only fail to give others their due, but we will

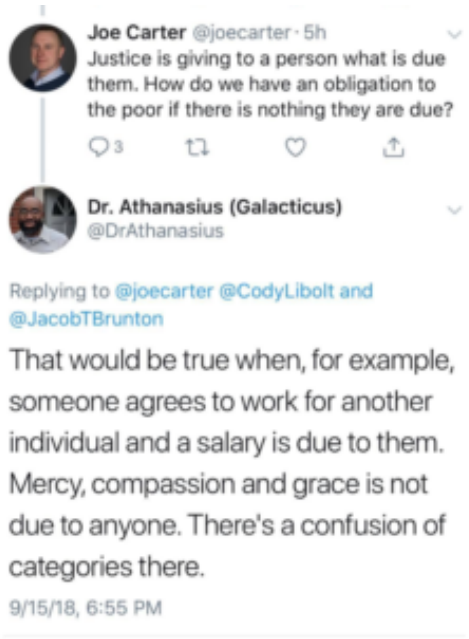
also be advocates for injustice in society. If we really care about righteousness, then we had better work a lot harder to obtain a clear understanding of what constitutes justice. Then—and only then—can we begin to apply justice to the social sphere in order to potentially redeem the concept of "social justice." A warning to the current proponents of that term, though: It's going to look a lot like Capitalism.

4

True Justice: Who Owns What– And to Whom Is What Owed?

True Justice: Who Owns What—And to Whom Is What Owed?

There's a lot of confusion about justice in the Church today, and whether or not charitable giving, or generosity, should be considered an act of justice. The below screenshot is a good example of such common confusion:



The purpose of this article is to help both sides think more clearly and consistently about justice by outlining the different fundamental theories of justice which are at play here.

The classical definition of justice is giving people what they are due. The potentially controversial part is in figuring out what people are due. How does one determine what someone else is owed, and who owes it? These are the questions which must be answered if we are going to move forward in this whole debate about social justice. The various answers to these questions will

prove to be the fundamental dividing lines between those disparate parties arguing about justice today—especially within the Church.

Notice that justice involves multiple factors. It involves a recipient (or one might say, a "claimant") to whom something is owed. It involves a giver, from whom something is owed. And finally, it involves something (an object) which is owed. So, one of the goals of a theory of justice should be guidance in figuring out who and what ought to fill those respective roles in any given situation.

The Need-Based Theory

While there are many highly nuanced theories of justice, there are two dominant fundamental theories, of which most of the others are slight variants. The first one I will call the need-based theory of justice. On this theory, need determines what one is owed. The recipient is any person who is in need, and the object owed is whatever will satiate that need. This gives us the recipient and the object, but not the one from whom it is owed. How does this theory of justice determine who owes assistance to the needy? Well, the only possible answer is: the un-needy—the able.

Now we have a full picture of this need-based theory of justice. Justice, on this view, consists of the able alleviating the needs of the needy.

You might recognize this from the Marxist slogan, "from each according to his ability, to each according to his need." While this is a Marxist-style conception of justice, it's important to realize that one can hold to this view of justice without being a full-fledged Marxist. In fact, one could hold to this view without believing in government-forced redistribution. Tim Keller, and others at The Gospel Coalition, have attempted just that. While affirming that the failure to give to those in need is "not just uncharitable, but unjust"[1] and even "robbery,"[2] they insist that they do not necessarily advocate for the government to get involved to correct such injustices.

You might ask, "why shouldn't the government right the injustice of robbery?" which would likely put Keller & Co. in a difficult spot as they attempt to demarcate where they think the government should be involved, and where it shouldn't. And they might even have a half-decent answer. However, I don't think that government involvement is the only—or the most important—problem with this need-based theory of justice.

The more fundamental problem with the need-based theory of justice is that it directly undermines the gospel. Every Christian, in studying the details of the gospel, learns very early about the crucial difference between the justice of God and the grace, or mercy, of God. Justice, we are taught, would be God giving you what you deserve, which is eternal wrath. Grace, or mercy, on the other hand, is God giving you undeserved favor—in spite of the wrath which you deserve.

But according to the need-based theory of justice, what you deserve is determined by what you need—and we certainly don't need eternal wrath. So, on this view of justice, it seems as though God is actually very unjust. Rather than sinners deserving eternal wrath from God, they deserve to have their needs met by God—and anything less would be an injustice on God's part. I've drawn out the implications of this particular problem elsewhere, and many of the responses I've gotten have indicated a common tactic of applying different standards of justice to God and to man.

Different Standards of Justice?

The objection goes something like this: "God's relationship to His 'wealth' is so radically different from man's relationship to his wealth that you can't possibly compare the two, or hold them to the same standard." There's certainly some plausibility to this objection. God's relationship to His 'wealth' (i.e., the things which are rightfully His which we humans need) is radically different, in certain respects, from our relationship to wealth. Granted. But does it follow that God and man adhere to radically different standards of justice? I don't see how that follows.

It may be true that the same standard of justice is applied in radically different ways to God and to man, given the radical differences between their respective relationships to their wealth. But if we say that they have different standards of justice—that entirely different theories of justice apply to them—then we are saying that there is a complete equivocation between God's justice and our own. An equivocation of this kind would be a massive theological problem (which I do not have the space to expound on here), and I don't think it can be maintained in the face of careful study of the Scriptures (which I will attempt to demonstrate below).

Everything Is a Gift from God, Therefore...?

But there's one other tactic often used to defend a version of this need-based theory of justice applied to man—without it being applied to God. This argument is summarized well in a recent tweet from TGC:

The author of this post (most likely Tim Keller), intends to draw a certain conclusion from the fact that everything we have is ultimately a gift from God. What is that conclusion? It is not merely that we have an obligation to be generous. Surely, no Christian would disagree with that conclusion. The conclusion is also not that genuine Christian compassion is supposed to result in generosity, which most Christians would also affirm. No, says the author. It is not just that the failure to be generous is "lacking in compassion," it's that it is "unjust." This is the conclusion the author wants to draw: that generous giving is

an act of justice, and the failure to give generously is an act of injustice. The author is explicitly not arguing about the Christian obligation to be generous (which is assumed under the concept of "compassion"). He is arguing for a certain view of justice.

So, the argument can be restated as follows: Everything we have ("even wealth for which we worked hard") is ultimately a gift from God. Therefore, justice demands that we generously give that wealth away to others. But does that conclusion follow? Remember, justice refers to what one is owed.

Does the fact that our wealth is ultimately a gift from God mean that others deserve it? It certainly means that we owe it to God. But there are some serious problems with the assumption that we "therefore" owe it to other people.

Problem 1

The first problem with this line of reasoning is that it conflates "others" with "God." It treats God and others as interchangeable—probably because they both represent the concept of "not being selfish." But self-sacrifice, in and of itself, is not the essence of morality, and neither is it sufficient for satisfying our moral obligations. If God has commanded something of us, it makes a difference whether we conceive of obedience as being given to Him or being given to the loose abstraction of "other people."

Problem 2

The second problem with this line of thinking is that it ignores the clear teachings of Scripture on the concept of private property. The concept of private property means that one's wealth (for which he has "worked hard") is rightfully—i.e., justly—his own. And this concept of property is assumed all throughout Scripture, but most clearly in the command, "thou shall not steal" (Ex. 20:13). Theft is a meaningless concept in the absence of private property.

But the theory of justice which many are advocating says just the opposite: that one's property is not, in fact, one's own; that it justly belongs to "others." Which others? Presumably, others who are in need of it. In this case, it would seem that theft for the purpose of alleviating one's need would be just. In fact, we couldn't even call it theft. Theft presupposes that the property is being taken away from the rightful owner. If anything, on this view of justice, the one who "worked hard" for his wealth is stealing from the one who has less wealth (for whatever reason), and the one with less wealth is merely carrying out justice when he takes the property which is "justly" his. This, I submit, cannot be defended by Scripture or by reason.

Problem 3

The final problem I'd like to point out with this line of reasoning is that it makes the same mistake which many antinomians (and sometimes Arminians) do regarding God's sovereignty and human responsibility. The antinomian argues, "Since God is sovereign, it doesn't matter what man does. All sins are ultimately ordained by God. Therefore, man can't be held responsible." Similarly, this view of justice argues, "Since God is sovereign, it doesn't matter what man does. All wealth is ultimately ordained by God. Therefore, man can't claim any responsibility for the wealth which he has worked hard for." They both make the same error of inferring that God's sovereignty negates human responsibility. But we—especially we reformed Christians—should know that this is an error. The fact that our wealth comes from God no more negates our rightful claim to it (before other men) than the fact that God is sovereign negates our responsibility for our sin. Divine causation does not negate human causation. That our wealth is ultimately a gift from God does not negate the way in which that wealth was created—namely, through human causation, or "hard work."

The Causation-Based Theory

And that concept—causation—brings us to the alternative theory of justice. On the causation-based theory, one's rightful property is determined, not by one's

needs, but by whether or not one has caused that property to be what it is. This is not to claim that the human producer is the sole cause of his wealth (as though God were not the ultimate cause). It merely recognizes that the human producer is a cause of the wealth—that he is the primary human cause of his wealth; and in virtue of his causal role, that he justly deserves to be the owner of that wealth.

Of course, since God is the ultimate cause, this theory would heartily affirm that God can justly lay claim to any man's wealth at any moment. That's why God can—and does—justly command that men charitably give away some of their wealth in certain circumstances. The difference however, between the need-based theory and this one, is that on this theory, when God commands that man give charitably, the giving is viewed as an act of justice to God—not to other people. The giving is done because the man is doing what the ultimate owner of that wealth (i.e. God) has commanded. It is not done because the recipient, who is in need, deserves it or had it owed to him. The other difference is that, on this theory, apart from God making such a command, the wealth is viewed as the property of he who produced it—whether or not there are others who might need it.[3]

Another way to think about this theory of justice is to think in terms of what one has earned. In fact, that's the way the Bible talks about justice when contrasting it with the grace (i.e. unearned favor) of God in the gospel. "For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 6:23). Wages are what you earn. The justice of God, Paul argues throughout Romans, would demand that God give us the death we have earned (through our "wages of sin"), but the free gift (i.e., that which we do not deserve) is eternal life in Christ. The whole dynamic of justice and grace in the gospel hinges on this merit-based view of justice.

But what about other forms of justice and injustice, beyond issues about property or wealth? What about slavery? Murder? Oppression? How do these issues square with this causation view of justice? In a way, the causation view of justice

regarding property is an outgrowth of a more general view of justice which recognizes that—on the horizontal level, in relation to other humans—each human being owns his own life.[4] Another way to say this is that every man has a fundamental right to life; that any threat to a man's life by another is an act of injustice. The most obvious threat to a man's life is murder, but there are other, similar threats. Slavery, for instance, may not take away a man's life (in the sense of killing him), but it does take away a significant aspect of his life, which is his liberty to live as he sees fit.

How does this relate to the causation theory of justice regarding private property? To answer that, ask yourself: what is property, or wealth? It's the product of human creativity. Wealth is produced. A net, a spear, a rifle, a tractor, an airplane, an oil rig—all of them are the product of human ingenuity; of men investing part of their life (such as their time, their talent, their labor, and especially their mind) into the production of something valuable. Because of this, a man's property is an extension of his life. To take away his property is tantamount to taking away the portion of his life (his time, his energy, his focus, etc...) which was poured into creating that property. And that is why it is unjust to take away a man's property—whether it is needed or not. No man's need gives him a right to the life (or therefore, the property) of another man. No amount of need could ever justify theft, just as no amount of need could ever justify slavery. In the end, they are the same thing: forcibly taking away part of the life of another man.

Systems of Injustice

We've talked about justice between individual men, but what about systems of injustice—or of oppression? Does this theory of justice allow for recognizing such a phenomenon? The answer is: of course. But only if we remember the definition of justice being used. Many who speak of "systems of oppression" today point to the existence of things related to need, and infer that since unmet needs exist in some systemic fashion, this must be evidence of systemic injustice or oppression. But the causation theory of justice does not look solely to needs or to suffering.

Rather, it looks to the cause of the needs or the suffering. Is the need caused by theft, or fraud, or slavery of some form? Or, is it caused by mere bad circumstances, poor decisions, or slothfulness? If the former, then justice should be swift. If the latter, then no injustice has occurred.

There are plenty of examples of true injustice (i.e. theft, fraud, or slavery) on a systemic level in today's society—but they are quite the opposite of what most would think of when speaking of "systemic injustice." Incidentally, the true systemic injustices (which I am about to name) are also typically the cause of much of the suffering of the poor. One glaring example of a systemic injustice which hurts the poor is minimum wage. The minimum wage is unjust because it prevents men from living according to their own judgment; from voluntarily entering into an employment agreement at a certain wage. In doing so, these laws make it much harder for unskilled workers to gain experience, and prices them out of the marketplace. Another systemic injustice is the welfare state, which forcibly takes money from the men who have produced it and redistributes it to men who have not produced it. It is a grave injustice against the producers of wealth, and it simultaneously and systematically harms the poor by encouraging them to rely on handouts and by stunting productivity in the marketplace which—over time—would allow for more general prosperity. One more systemic injustice is public education, which unjustly takes wealth away from those who produce it in order to "educate" other people's children—in addition to (often) forcibly taking children away from their parents, in order to "educate" in ways highly disagreeable to their parents. These are just some of the true systemic injustices in society, for which the Church ought to be heartbroken, and against which we ought to fight.

Much more could be said about the many other systems of injustice and oppression in our contemporary society, but that's not the point of this article. The point is to demonstrate that when we consider true—Biblical—justice, it turns out that social justice (i.e., justice in society) looks radically different than what is currently being advocated under the guise of "social justice." The problem with the "social justice" crowd is not that they want justice in society.

It’s that they have bought into a false theory of justice, and as a result, what they are advocating for is more aptly called “social injustice.” If the Church wants to truly advocate for justice in society—and I think it should—then it must denounce the false need-based theory of so-called justice, and learn to embrace and defend true justice.

Footnotes:

1. See the tweet from TGC below.
2. Tim Keller, Generous Justice: How God's Grace Makes Us Just, p.17.
3. This assumes that God’s command to give is not that we alleviate every need possible. I’ll have a follow up article on when and how God has commanded us to give.
4. Again, this does not mean that God does not ultimately own every man’s life. It means that under God’s ownership, there is no human which may lay claim to another man’s life.

5

What Does Justice Require? – On Racial Reconciliation

What Does Justice Require? — On Racial Reconciliation

I loathe racism.

I loathe injustice.

And, I loathe so-called "social" or "racial" justice.

How is that consistent? Today's culture—and increasingly, today's Church—would tell you that it's not consistent; that the third statement is entailed by the first two. They would claim that "social" or "racial" justice just is the combination of fighting racism and fighting injustice. The trick is that they mean something very different by the concept of justice than I do. In fact, I suspect that what I mean by justice is what most people would mean by it—if they stopped and thought about it for a moment. But I won't claim to speak for most people. I'll just speak for myself, and let you decide.

What is justice[1]? One thing is certain: justice is important. Justice is integral to the Christian worldview, to the gospel, and to peaceful relationships with other people. It is not optional. Whatever it is, it must be pursued with fervent passion. It must never be compromised. And all that which opposes it must, itself, be opposed. A white-hot commitment to justice is, and must be, at the absolute center of Christian morality. Yes, there's grace (and how the two relate is an important, but separate, topic). But grace is defined by justice. Justice is the center, the fundamental. This—the grave importance of justice—is what the social justice crowd gets right. Tragically though, I would argue, that's about all they get right.

If justice is as important as described above, getting it wrong must be tragic. If you get justice wrong, you will end up calling that which is truly unjust "justice," and calling that which is truly just "injustice." If you get justice wrong, you will incur upon yourself the WOE of Isaiah 5:20: "WOE to those who call good evil and evil good." If you get justice wrong, you will get the gospel wrong. You will get God wrong. And you will find yourself waging an apparently righteous war against justice. You will—quite unknowingly—become a zealous pawn in the enemy's battalions. Such is the tragic fate—I believe—of most Christians today who advocate loudly for "social" or "racial" justice. They are pawns of the enemy. They are warriors for injustice.

Does that sound harsh? Perhaps it is. But remember, they will—they must—think the same thing about me, if they truly care as much about justice as they claim to. That's because we can't both be right. If their view of justice is accurate, then I am the enemy's pawn; I am the warrior for injustice. But if my view of justice is accurate, then they are. It's one or the other. There is no middle ground when it comes to conflicting visions of justice. And the Church must decide which vision it will adopt.

What are those conflicting visions, and which one is the right one? What does true justice require when it comes to something like racial reconciliation?

Justice is Factual

I would suggest that the first thing justice requires is attention to facts above feelings. This does not mean that feelings are irrelevant when it comes to implementing justice. Indeed, we ought to be passionately inflamed against injustice. However, feelings are irrelevant when it comes to identifying justice. That someone feels as though they have been the victim of injustice does not mean that they have in fact been the victim of injustice. And justice demands that we make that distinction. Justice refuses to be swayed by mere emotional appeals.

Suppose a young black man feels as though he has been the victim of racism. If he has, then justice demands extreme moral condemnation against those who have been racist against him. If he hasn't, then justice demands that no such moral condemnation should be issued. If he's mistaken about being the victim of racism, that doesn't mean that he hasn't truly suffered. It simply means that racism was not the cause of his suffering. Love, in this case, would demand counseling him in order to discover what the source of suffering is, and then working to remedy it. But justice must refuse to agree with him about the racism, apart from any evidence of racism, merely for the sake of "affirming" his feelings. Justice is not based on feelings. It is based on fact.

Justice Is Specific

That brings us to another aspect of justice: Facts are specific—and so is justice. The sword of justice is too sharp to safely wield against vague accusations. One very common vague accusation today is the accusation of "racism." There once was a time when everyone knew exactly what racism was, but that is no longer the case. Racism used to mean judging someone based on the color of their skin, rather than on the content of their character. Today, it means almost the opposite. We are told that we must think about people according to their skin color—and then rank them by class according to the relative perceived amount of suffering each racial class has endured. The failure to acknowledge one's own racial "privilege," or the lack of racial privilege of others, is now what is meant by racism. Notice the shift, though, from the old definition to the new. Much of the moral outrage against racism comes from the leftover understanding of the old definition. But the content of the old definition does not carry over into the new one. Why, then, should the moral outrage carry over?

The advocates of the new definition of racism rely on an equivocation between the old definition and the new. But such equivocations are unjust. The failure to "recognize" the supposed privilege of having one skin color over another is not the same thing as judging someone based on the color of their skin. Those two things do not deserve to be labeled by the same term. The attempt to conflate

those two as one is duplicitous. And justice hates duplicity. Justice is eager to define its terms—and stick to them.

Justice is Individual

There's another problem with the new conception of racism (as far as justice is concerned): it is fundamentally collectivistic. But justice is not collectivistic. Just as the sword of justice is too sharp to wield against vague accusations, it is also too sharp to indiscriminately wave around in a crowd. Justice is not a blunt instrument. It is sharp and specific—to be waged against individuals. That's because justice is concerned with moral choices and actions, and only individuals make choices and actions. Many individuals might be united in virtue of some common choice or action—in which case they may all, "collectively," be guilty. But the "collective guilt," then, is rooted in the common individual choices they all made. Justice does not, however, allow for a collective guilt which is rooted in some non-moral aspect of a collective—like skin color. Thus, justice must reject collectivistic appeals to guilt which are not explicitly based in the choices of the individuals who compose that collective.

Consider the racism of the 50's & 60's, for instance. Thabiti Anyabwile suggests that all white people who were alive at that time were responsible for the acts of racism during that era—and especially, the racist act of assassinating Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. While I think Thabiti is likely correct that many more people were complicit in such atrocities than the immediate actors, justice prevents me from concluding that such complicity extends to all white people who were alive at that time. It may extend to all people (whether white, or otherwise) who agreed with the racist mentality. It may even extend to all people (whether white, or otherwise) who did not do what they could to speak out against the evil of racism. But it cannot, and must not, extend to a certain group of people merely based on their "whiteness," as Mr. Anyabwile would have us believe. Complicity—which is a form of guilt—tracks with actions (or lack thereof), not skin tone. At least, that is what justice should conclude.

Justice is Objective

There's a reason that the advocates of the new forms of so-called "justice" elevate feelings over facts, redefine concepts like racism, and dismiss the individual for the sake of the collective. It all comes from a fundamentally new conception of reality which teaches that there is no shared, objective, vantage point on reality. There is a great chasm—this view teaches—between "the white experience" and "the black experience," such that one can never fully understand the other. There is white life, and there is black life; there are white ideas, and black ideas; there is white theology, and black theology; white justice, and black justice. And while the two may try to live in "harmony," they can never fully agree, because they can never fully understand each other. Understanding is impossible, they say, but not empathy.

This is why feelings must be elevated above facts: there are no common facts. There are white facts and black facts, and no common ground between them. Facts cannot unite us. Only feelings can. This is also why racism, and everything else (like justice), must be redefined in collectivistic terms. Your view of reality is not your view of reality, as an individual; it is your collective's view of reality, of which you are merely a blind follower. Your collective, white, view of reality is in opposition to the collective, black, view of reality. And racism, then, means the failure to reject your white view of reality in favor of the black view of reality. To exercise "racial justice," then, you must reject your white view of reality and support the black view of reality—whether you understand it or not, whether you agree with it or not.

Remember that understanding and agreement are impossible. There are only warring, pre-determined, collectivistic views of reality—and your only choice is whether you will selfishly hold to your collective's view of reality, or give it up for the sake of another collective's view of reality. This, I submit, is wicked.

If this racialized and collectivized relativism is true, then there can be no justice. Thankfully, it's not true. Relativism—whether collective, or individual—by definition, cannot be true. And since justice is concerned with truth, justice demands that this racialized relativism be rejected. Justice demands that we

affirm objective reality—and everyone's ability to objectively access it. This does not mean ignoring one's bias. It means objectively identifying one's bias, and correcting it according to objective reality. Justice must always be concerned with truth—which means that it must always be concerned with objectivity. If the contemporary "warriors" of so-called "justice" deny the possibility of objectivity, then the war they are waging is against the possibility of justice. And justice demands that they be stopped.

Justice Redeemed

If what I've said above is true, then many of the contemporary voices which cry so loudly for things like "racial justice" today are imposters when it comes to true justice. (Before you condemn a given voice as an imposter, make sure that you justly confirm the facts about what that voice is teaching!) If what I've said above is true, then much of the growing division in the Church today has a lot more to do with conflicting visions of justice than it does with conflicting values on race. The solution, then, is not primarily "racial reconciliation" (though that certainly needs to happen where true racism is still taking place). The solution is the rediscovery of justice. If the concept of justice has been distorted, then no division can be mended until the true concept of justice has been redeemed.

This is the conversation the Church desperately needs to have: a conversation, not about race, but about justice. Is justice based on feelings or on facts? Is justice vague or specific when it comes to accusations of things like racism? Is justice collectivistic and based merely on things like skin color, or individual and based on choices and actions? Is justice objective or relativistic? These are the questions that need to be asked, and explicitly answered. These are the lines that need to be drawn if we want to truly fight for justice.

If you agree with me about justice—that it is factual, specific, individual, and objective—then do not cede the language of justice to those who are its enemies. Do not grant them the title of a "warrior" for justice. They are warriors, alright, but only for injustice. If someone claims to be for "racial justice," or "social

justice," ask them what they mean. The extent to which their concept of "justice" is unjust is the extent to which you must not allow them a claim to justice. Do not call them "social justice warriors." Call them "social injustice warriors." Do not say that they want "racial justice." They want racial injustice. Call them on it. In the name of justice, do not allow the concept of justice to be perverted by those who wage war against it. Redeem it. By doing so, you may be maligned. You may be condemned as "unjust." You may have all kinds of evil spoken against you falsely, but you will be blessed, because you will be defending true justice (Mt. 5:10-11).

Footnote:

1 - My aim in what follows is not to provide an exact, academic style, definition of justice. To do so, I would have to also provide the same type of definition of the competing theory of justice, and then analyze the strengths and weaknesses of each. That's certainly a worthy project (and possibly another upcoming article), but it's not the goal of this article. Instead, my aim here is simply to outline the general major features of the competing views of justice in order to indicate that there are indeed competing theories at play, and to show what is at stake in taking them seriously.

6

Venezuela: Why We Must "Assign Blame"

Venezuela: Why We Must "Assign Blame"

In his latest column for Townhall, John Stossel writes about the pushback he's gotten from the left for criticizing those celebrities—like Michael Moore, Oliver Stone, and Noam Chomsky—who praised Venezuela's socialistic policies.

Chomsky, in particular, demanded "an abject apology" for what Stossel had written in his prior column. In polite fashion, Stossel simply states that no such apology will be forthcoming, and then he proceeds to the topic of his present column, which is focused on an appeal for Venezuela to "try capitalism." But it's the way that Stossel transitions from talking about the animosity of socialists, like Chomsky, to the topic of "trying capitalism" that I want to focus on. His transition is just a small sentence, and I don't think he meant much by it, but it is suggestive of a grave issue which advocates of capitalism ought not dismiss. It reads, "But assigning blame matters less than what should be done now."

Does it? Does assigning blame for mass poverty and starvation matter less than what should be done after the fact? There's one very obvious answer to that: Of course assigning blame matters less than fixing the problem. But moving onto to fix the problem assumes that we all agree on what the problem is. Unfortunately, that's not the case in this situation. The advocates of socialism couldn't disagree more with Stossel about what the problem is and how to fix it. And so long as those advocates of socialism hold the kind of sway over public opinion that they do, "moving on" to fix the problem is not really an option. Before the problem can truly be fixed, the general public needs to be aware of its cause. In other words, before we move on and hope that capitalism will be tried, we must "assign blame" for the woes of socialism. And we must do so as loudly and publicly as possible.

This is the missing element in the contemporary fight for capitalism: a strong sense of morality and justice. Socialists win because they've convinced

themselves, and most of humanity, that they occupy the moral high ground. This is evidenced by the fact that Chomsky—the man who "provided cover for a regime where 11,500 infants died from lack of medical care[1]"—has the gall to demand an apology from Stossel for pointing it out. Stossel does well not to apologize, but dropping the subject is the next worst thing to an apology. It allows Chomsky, and all of the envy-ridden socialist-sympathizers around the world, to breathe a sigh of relief and convince themselves that they aren't truly to blame.

I understand the impulse not to want to "rub it in." Capitalists, to their credit, tend to have a benevolent view of men, even of their enemies, which drives them to assume that those enemies will recognize their own mistakes without having their noses rubbed in their mess. Sadly, that benevolence has proved far too generous. We often chastise the socialists for not learning from history—but have we? When will we learn that they aren't simply misguided; that one more empirical proof of its failure won't quench their love for socialism? It's time for us capitalists to wake up and realize that the socialists aren't fighting an economic, or even political, battle—but a moral one. And we must meet them on that field.

They count on us not to assign blame for the atrocities of their policies. They count on us not to blame them for the millions murdered under regimes like those of Stalin and Mao, for mass starvation, and for reducing moderately wealthy nations to poverty-ridden chaos. They are counting on our moral silence, and we must not give it to them. Until and unless the socialist sympathizers are driven to issue abject apologies of their own, for the rampant death and utter desolation which their ideologies have unleashed upon the world, assigning blame not only matters more than moving on to the solution. It is a prerequisite for the solution. Until then, assigning blame, loudly and publicly, for the atrocities of socialism is the practical—and the moral—responsibility of capitalists, and of all lovers of freedom.

Footnote:
1 Quote by Thor Halversson, a Venezuelan filmmaker; as quoted by Stossel.

7

The Unicorn Logic Against Free Markets – A Response to Andrew Strain at First Things

The Unicorn Logic Against Free Markets—A Response to Andrew Strain at First Things

In his recent piece, "Free Markets and Unicorns," at First Things, Andrew Strain made the argument that free markets, like unicorns, don't exist—so we should stop trying to defend them. Unfortunately for Mr. Strain, it is his laughable reasoning—not the defense of free markets—which belongs in the fanciful world of unicorns.

His argument goes like this:

There are two economic sectors: private and public. The private sector is the supposedly free market, while the public sector is under government control. But, as everyone knows, the free market is built on those bastions of American greed: corporations. And—here's where he thinks he's got us—corporations are not entirely private sector beasts. Instead, they're a public sector mongrel that tries to function privately.

Why does Strain think corporations belong, at least in part, to the public sector? Because they rely on the government—gasp!—to uphold their precious contracts! Thus, apart from the government's "help" corporations couldn't exist, and by resistless logic, neither could the free market. So, Strain concludes, there really is no such thing as a free market or private sector in any meaningful sense. Therefore, no one should object when the government intrudes into the economy because, after all, there is no difference between the public sector of the government and the wider economy.

Did you see the sleight of hand? Strain thinks that relying on government in any form makes something "public sector" to that extent. But that's absurd. To see

how absurd it is, consider what this would mean in regard to a non-corporate business, like a local bakery.

The local bakery must "rely on the government" to uphold its contractual agreements with all sorts of other businesses: with vendors, repairmen, utility companies, insurance agencies, etc… Does this mean that the local bakery isn't truly private sector, and that it should therefore be subject to the public interests of the government?

Or consider a house. Home-owners must "rely on the government" to uphold contracts with utility companies, insurance companies, etc… not to mention relying on the government for police protection against criminals. Does this make one's home part of the public sector? Of course not. That's absurd. But that's the reasoning employed by Mr. Strain.

If running a corporation is no longer "private," by virtue of the fact that the government must uphold contracts in order for it to function, then neither is owning a home, by virtue of the fact that the government is needed to keep criminals out of it. If relying on government means that corporations are "public," and thereby subject to the economic whims of "the public good," then so is your house.

Because Strain—by his unicorn logic—thinks that corporations are "a product of the state," he concludes that they must be used by the state for "the common good." By the same shoddy reasoning, every local business and every private home in the nation must be used by the state for the common good—whatever the hell that is.

So, if Strain wishes to ride his unicorn logic into the realm of state-controlled property for the common good, I say he should start with his own home.

I'll be by later on my communist unicorn to claim my little piece of the common good from the Strain residence.

7

It's People They Want to Fetter: On the Immorality of the Anti-Capitalist Conservatives

It's People They Want to Fetter: On the Immorality of the Anti-Capitalist Conservatives

It's not uncommon to hear leftists complain about "the unfettered market." But if you thought the far left was the only threat against free market capitalism, think again.

The Anti-Capitalist Conservatives

In the last few weeks, prominent conservative voices have begun to parrot leftist-style talking points about the supposed "immorality" of the free market. It began with Tucker Carlson's monologue on January 2nd, in which he mocked many conservatives for thinking that the market is "sacrosanct" (a typical leftist-smear), and argued that the free market was at least partially to blame for the breakdown of the family in rural America.

While some conservatives (rightly) called out Carlson for his populist victim-mongering and for his shoddy historical analysis (the best of which was probably this piece by David French at *National Review*), other conservatives seem to have taken his monologue as a signal that it was safe for them to stick their toes a little further out of the closet of anti-capitalist sentiment.

David Brooks, the token conservative over at *The New York Times*, wrote an opinion piece shortly after Carlson's monologue on "The Remoralization of the Market." The obvious implication from the title is that the market has somehow been de-moralized. Some of the chief supposed sins of the market which Brooks cites are the fact that some hedge-fund managers could earn billion-dollar salaries, and the fact that some successful companies (like Apple) have managed to reduce their tax-burden (he even insists that "Apple employees should be humiliated and ashamed").

Apparently, Brooks agrees with Bernie that it's immoral to earn a lot of money through free trade, and that it's even more immoral to find ways of keeping one's own money safe from the looting and wasteful government bureaucrats. But Brooks isn't the only self-proclaimed conservative agreeing with the likes of Bernie Sanders.

Rod Dreher, of *The American Conservative*, followed Tucker's monologue with his own piece in which he confesses his "Secret Right-Wing Elizabeth Warren Crush." Dreher positively gushes with praise for Warren's economic policies, and even claims that they are "fundamentally conservative, in an older, more organic sense." Of course, he may be right. There might be a margin of overlap between some unprincipled conservative rhetoric of the past and the "softer, gentler" socialism being pushed by progressives today. All this would prove is that conservatives haven't always been the best at articulating their own position in a consistent manner—which, of course, shouldn't come as a newsflash.

The important thing to note is that conservative intellectuals (the very people who were supposed to be the defenders of capitalism) are beginning to join forces with both leftist intellectuals and social justice warriors in waging an all-out moral war against free market capitalism.

Who, then, will provide a defense? Only those who understand that the war is indeed moral; i.e., only those who are prepared to give a moral defense of capitalism.

That's one of our chief missions here at *For the New Christian Intellectual.* Incidentally, the fact that those conservative intellectuals who are betraying capitalism all claim to be Christians might tip you off to the motive behind our name. We aim to provide a moral defense for capitalism, and to equip other Christians to do likewise.

Morality & The Market

To defend the morality of the free market, we need first to understand what it is.

There is not some nebulous, disembodied, entity called "the market." There's only people, living their lives. The concept of "the market" is just a shorthand way of summarizing all the choices made by those individual people in their day-to-day lives.

So, when we talk about a "free market" what we mean is a free people. And when they talk about a "fettered market," what they are talking about is a fettered people. Of course, no one wants to be stuck with the position of arguing for putting people in chains, so they prefer to speak about the market as a mere abstract entity which exists apart from the individual choices which make it up. As a result, they think they are justified in some rather wild expectations about what the market should do.

On the Supposed "Failures" of the Market

One common complaint seems to be about the proportional ability of the market to fix certain social ills. David Brooks comments:

"In a healthy society, people try to balance a whole bunch of different priorities: economic, social, moral, familial. Somehow over the past 40 years economic priorities took the top spot and obliterated everything else. As a matter of policy, we privileged economics and then eventually no longer could even see that there could be other priorities."

What does Brooks have in mind as the ideal way to balance these "priorities," and in what way does he think economics has "obliterated everything else" in the last 40 years? He tells us:

"For example, there's been a striking shift in how corporations see themselves. In normal times, corporations serve a lot of stakeholders — customers, employees,

the towns in which they are located. But these days corporations see themselves as serving one purpose and one stakeholder — maximizing shareholder value. Activist investors demand that every company ruthlessly cut the cost of its employees and ruthlessly screw its hometown if it will raise the short-term stock price."

Now remember, Brooks' complaint is about how free market capitalism "obliterates" every other social "priority." How? By allowing corporations to aim toward making a profit (i.e., "maximizing stakeholder value"). The profit motive is the problem, according to Brooks. Rather than making a profit (and thus "screwing" their hometown—as if profits are made at the expense of others), Brooks thinks that corporations should be forced to "serve" their communities. That's the moral purpose of corporations, according to Brooks.

Oh, the Hypocritical Irony

Now this is interesting, and not a little ironic. Brooks complains that the economy has crowded out other aspects of life, and as elaboration on this complaint, he explains that he wants the market to infiltrate and "serve" every other aspect of life. Which is it? Does he want the market to leave other aspects of life alone, or does he want to utilize the market to manipulate those other aspects of life? Does he want to keep the market "in its place," or does he want it infiltrating and tinkering with other areas of social life?

Carlson makes a similar move. He emphatically denounces the idea that the free market can be a cure-all (as if advocates of the free market think it is), noting that happiness is not automatically achieved by a higher GDP. But then he blames the market for all sorts of social ills, from drug use to the breakdown of the family.

Dreher, likewise, wants the market to do more than merely deliver the goods. He approvingly quotes Yuval Levin, the editor of National Review, who claims that market motives "can be very bad for family and community."

Like the anti-capitalist left, these anti-capitalist conservatives lack the self-awareness to realize that they are the ones making a cultic idol out of the market. They are the ones who expect the market to be a panacea for all social ills, from personal piety to the general moral health of the community. They want to replace the Church with the market. And they have the audacity of accusing us (those who promote free market capitalism) of "worshiping" the market. They want the material goods traded in the market to produce the spiritual values of a moral character. And they call us the materialists. Like the hypocrites of the left, these anti-capitalist conservatives are guilty of the very sins for which they claim to condemn capitalism.

But apart from this blatant hypocrisy, there's a more fundamental problem with their expectations for the market: it isn't supposed to do all those things. In fact, the market isn't "supposed" to do anything. And this is where morality truly applies to the market: not in what it does, but in what it is.

As noted above, the "market" is just a shorthand way of referring to the vast matrix of human choices in society. Therefore, when we think about the market we should first and foremost have in mind the concept of individual choice.

To say that the market should have "done" something (like keep families together, for instance) is to say that the conflux of every human choice in society should have resulted in that thing. To blame the market for the breakdown of the family is to blame the choices of every individual in society for that breakdown. It's a way of transferring responsibility to everyone else, to society at large. This is merely a "family-friendly" version of the victim-mongering, responsibility shirking, collectivism of the left (which, incidentally, isn't actually friendly to the family at all).

The Collectivistic Ends Justify the Bloody Means

This collectivistic misunderstanding about the nature of the market undergirds most of the other objections which conservatives have brought against it as well.

Consider the call for "balancing" market interests with other social interests, which was alluded to by Brooks above, and is more fully elaborated on by Yuval Levin in his article at National Review:

"Markets and a traditional moral order characterized by commitments to family, faith, community, and country can also be in very great tension with one another. The market values risk-taking and creative destruction that can be very bad for family and community... The things we value are therefore sometimes in tension with each other... One key to finding this balance is to recognize that the market is a means, not an end."

These conservatives see the market as being "in tension" with other social values, like "faith, family, community," etc... But such "tension" is only possible if we join the collectivists of the left in forgetting that "the market" is just a shorthand way of talking about individual choices regarding material wealth. The only way the economic choices of other individuals in society can be seen as a threat to one's "faith, family, [or] community" is if one thinks that those things rely on forcing people to choose differently than they otherwise would have. I don't know what "faith" Yuval Levin has in mind, but the Christian faith certainly doesn't require physical force to be exerted in order to be healthy. Neither does a properly Christian conception of family or community.

Note also that the only way to achieve this collectivistic aim of "balance" is for some person (or group of persons) to attempt some sort of calibration of the economy—again, as if the economy is something separable from the individual choices of which it is composed. In reality, any attempt to calibrate the market is an attempt to manipulate individuals—whether through force or fraud.

Moreover, notice how Yuval Levin suggests we resolve the supposed tension. He says that we must "recognize that the market is a means, not an end." This sentence very succinctly demonstrates the fundamental immorality of how these conservatives think about the market.

They see the market as a tool to be used in the construction of a good society. But again, the market is just the sum of individual choices. To treat the market as a tool is to treat individuals as tools. When they say that "the market is a means, not an end," they are saying that the lives of individual men and women are mere "means" to be used for their collectivistic ends. This is what they want when they call for "limits," "bridles," and "fetters" to be placed upon the market. What they are really calling for is the limiting, the bridling, and the fettering of individual men and women. Those who mock an unbridled market are merely trying to mask their own unbridled power-lust.

To these men, the market—and thus, the individual choices of which it is composed—is merely a tool for them to utilize as they see fit. They are utilitarians, through and through, for whom the end of their ideal society justifies the means of shackling individual innocent people.

Just like the progressive leftists, these conservatives believe that there are no moral restrictions on their attempts to manipulate the market—so long as they are doing it for whatever they have chosen to define as the "common good."

So what if the local landscaping company wants to make a profit by hiring (legal) immigrants who are willing to work for less money than a "native born American"? Carlson doesn't care about the individual owners of that company any more than Brooks cares about the individual shareholders of Apple, who likewise want to make a profit. If the common good of "faith & family" (whatever that might mean) calls for them to sacrifice their profits, then so be it.

These conservatives have completely abandoned the concept of inalienable individual rights, and thus, have abandoned the only moral restriction on government force. So long as the free choices of individuals is seen as a mere "means to an end," that freedom can—and will—be taken away whenever, and to whatever extent, their arbitrary "end" is perceived to be in danger.

And no matter how noble their professed ends seem to be, the only inevitable end of this monstrous "the-ends-justify-the-means" mentality is mass bloodshed—as has been witnessed time and again throughout the last few centuries. Once you remove the moral barrier of individual rights, and replace it with some hazy notion of "the common good," the only thing preventing the bloodshed is time and happenstance—both of which are too quickly spent. So long as conservatives agree with leftists in their contempt for individual rights, such bloodshed will be the end for America as well.

There's Still Hope

But it doesn't have to end that way. There is still hope—however dim—for America to return to its roots; to return to those fundamental principles which have so far protected it from those bloody ends of other nations. We can still reawaken the American spirit of liberty, of personal responsibility, and of inalienable individual rights. But only if we speak boldly with absolute moral conviction against all those—whether on the left, or on the right—who lust for power in the attempt to turn the lives and wealth of some men into the means of others. Only if we reclaim the moral high ground which is rightfully ours.

We—the advocates of free market capitalism—are the ones who truly promote the morality of the market, because we are the only ones who adhere strictly to moral principles. We are the ones who do not set aside those principles for the pragmatic expediency of the moment. We do not sacrifice our moral principles on the utilitarian and collectivistic altar of "the common good."

They—the enemies of free market capitalism—are the idolaters, who yearn to replace and supplant both family and Church with the market. They are the true materialists, who reduce all human virtue down to problems which they think can, or should, be solved by manipulating the market. They are the moral compromisers who are eager to jettison the only moral principle which protects men from mob rule for the sake of their utilitarian ends; to eschew the clarity of

"black and white" moral thinking, in order to settle for the coward's comfort of lurking in the gray muck of "balance" and "tension."

These "conservative" enemies of capitalism are revealing the underlying reality that, in fundamental conviction, they agree with the progressive left and their social justice warriors. They are moral compromisers, power-lusters, and half-hearted socialists.

They do not have the moral vision or conviction to lead in the defense of capitalism.

Competent conservative leaders would recognize and promote the essential role of inalienable individual rights as protection against every power-lusting pressure group. They would call for a separation of economics and state, for the same reason that they call for a separation of Church and state. They would speak in clear moral principles, rather than appealing to vague pragmatic ends. And they wouldn't attempt to engage in the insane attempt to "balance" good ends which are not truly in tension with each other to begin with. The conservative leaders we need today are those who unapologetically call for laissez-faire capitalism as the only moral social system. Nothing less will do.

9

Russell Moore Says Rights Are Never Absolute

Russell Moore Says Rights Are Never Absolute

In a video released yesterday by The Gospel Coalition, Russell Moore, the president of the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission, said, "every right that we have in society is never an absolute."

This was in response to the question posed by Kevin DeYoung, Chairman of the Board of The Gospel Coalition, about how to defend religious liberty in the face of objections about potential abuses. Specifically, he wanted to know how to respond to the objection that religious liberty means that anyone can claim that their religion teaches them, for example, to beat their wife, or prevent their child from obtaining essential medical treatment.

Of course, the most direct answer would have been that religious liberty is about protecting individual rights; and since such abuses violate individual rights, they are not covered by religious liberty. Unfortunately, that was not Moore's response.

Instead, he claimed that rights are "never an absolute," and went on in the ensuing discussion to indicate that rights are, in fact, subject to modification in order to "balance ... conflicting interests," especially the interests of "the government."

It is not the rights of the individuals involved which must be taken into consideration, according to Moore, but the interests of those involved. Although, that's not even accurate. It's not the interests of those involved, but the interest of the government. The emphasis, for him, is on whether or not the government has an interest in stepping in. Thus, the reason it is appropriate for the government to stop physical abuse in the home, is not necessarily because such abuse violates the rights of the abused, but because the government has an interest in stopping it.

The disastrous implications are twofold. The first is that physical abuse really is viewed as an exercise of "religious liberty," which the government must curtail. The second is that our non-absolute rights, whether pertaining to religious liberty or otherwise, are wholly subject to the interests of the government.

If it is in the interests of the government, they may stop physical abuse. If not, not. If it is in the interests of the government, they may uphold your religious liberty. If not, not. What if it were in the interests of the government to force someone to bake a cake? What if it were in the interests of the government to force a pastor to skip Romans 1? What if it were in the interests of the government to turn a blind eye to the slaughter of infants? If rights are "never an absolute," then we have no answer.

If our protection from physical abuse, and our exercise of religious liberty, are entirely contingent upon the interests of the government; if no right is ever an absolute, then how can we be said to possess inalienable rights?

The president of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, along with those at The Gospel Coalition, either do not understand The Declaration of Independence, or they do not agree with it. If they did, they would never speak of rights being non-absolute. And they would never speak of balancing rights with "the interests of the government." Such language is completely out of step with the founding principles of this country, and utterly antithetical to the concept of individual rights.

But it is not too clear whether these Christian leaders actually care about individual rights. In fact, Moore seems to mock the concept of individual rights when he, laughing, says that it is not as though everyone in the country has a golden card that says, "I have a religious objection and that means I am completely free." He was talking about the draft; about being forced by the government to fight in a war; about being sent to die for the "interests of the government." And about that, he laughingly says that it is not as though everyone has a little golden card that says, "I'm free."

That is exactly what the Declaration of Independence says: that every individual has a golden card that says, "I'm free; free from the collectivistic whims of my brothers; free from the interests of the government; free to live my life as I see fit, neither physically violating, nor being physically violated by, others." This is what Christians—and sadly, our Christian leaders—must relearn. Our rights do not come from the government, and thus are not subject to its "interests." As Tim Keller insinuated in the video, there is no right to "religious liberty" the way it is conceived of above—but that's not because religious liberty is rooted, as he says, in a "cultural mood." It's because religious liberty is simply one application of individual rights; namely, individual right to conscience, and to live according to one's conscience so long as it does not violate the rights of others. Rights don't come from belonging to certain groups—whether religious, ethnic, socio-economic, or sexual. Our rights come from our humanity, and that's why they are individual rights. That's also why they are, and must be, absolute.

FOR THE NEW CHRISTIAN INTELLECTUAL

Help Support this Project

Your donation allows us to create more content like this and to equip and train others doing the same.

DONATE