

Justice: God's Power For

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If the Church understands justice from the narratives of Israel and Jesus, it will have to connect justice to God's righteousness. These narratives are expressions of God's righteousness, which is God's power of life against death. Justice is then the creation of the conditions in which God's creatures may survive and flourish in the face of the power of evil, sin and death.

God's justice is creative. It creates new human beings and new conditions for life. It works against the love of death. God's love of all creatures that are subjected to the power of death gives them place and power to stand. Thus justice, in the first instance, has more to do with homemaking than courtroom and legislature. When the scriptures talk about God's justice they typically speak of God bringing into being a new economy or household. This is the reason the whole of God's history with the creation can be described as the *oikonomia tou theou*, the "economy of God." God builds households so that there may be justice.

THE HOUSEHOLD OF GOD IN SCRIPTURE

■ One might say that the basic concern of the Torah and the Gospel is how God and the community of God's people will distribute goods so that God's creatures, so that the whole creation may live.

■ The Torah rests within the framework of Yahweh's promise that poverty will cease, that there will be no more poor in the household (Deut. 15:4-5).

■ Show justice, says God's economy, by not harvesting your field all the way to the edge, by establishing tithe for the poor, by keeping the Fallow Year, the Sabbath Year and the Jubilee Year. Show justice, says God's economy by not charging interest when you give a loan to the poor (Ex: 25:25, cf. Deut. 23:19-20; Lev. 25:35-38). There is only one reason for not charging interest: interest leads to slavery. Even when interest was introduced into the household of Israel, the Torah placed strict regulations on the use and abuse for loans. "If ever you take your neighbor's garment in pledge, you shall restore it to him before the sun goes down; for that is his only covering, it is his mantle for his body; in what else shall he sleep? And if he cries to me, I will hear, for I am compassionate." (Ex. 22:26-27).

■ The Hebrew word for "compassion" has the same root as the word for "womb." It is as though Yahweh says, "I am like the womb of a mother who has given birth to my children out of slavery. My love requires that your household relations be just." What does it mean to do justice? It means to distribute so that no one falls into slavery again.

HOME MEANS ACCESS TO LIFE

■ We have all had, at least fleetingly, an experience of home. Home is where no one ever forgets your name. Home is where no matter what you have done, you will be forgiven and accepted. Home is where there is always a place for you at the table and where you can be certain that what is on the table will be shared. To be a part of a home or a household is to have access to life.

■ The deepest experience of home in the biblical traditions is the Sabbath. As Jürgen Moltmann has argued, the scriptures view God as creating everything that is for the sake of God's Sabbath. **Sabbath is about rest, celebration and joy. But it is also fundamentally about justice. For on the Sabbath we experience already under the conditions of history the cessation of those things by which human beings dominate each other. That is, work, exclusive claim to property and competitive consumption come to an end. Life ceases to be driven by making, owning and competing so that the household, the economy, may take part in the joy of God's creation.**

■ What separates human beings from the rest of the creation is that they have been called to be God's "economists," to help in the distribution of God's gifts for life. Thus the human being is called to be a doer of justice.

■ But there can be no justice without a household, or to put it more exactly, justice will be determined by the character of the household in which we live. It is not meaningful to speak of justice until we are involved in living communities which in their relationships and conflicts are struggling for justice. The substantive life of society is prior to and intimates what justice is. Once we know the stories, the identity, the interests and loves, the passions and commitments, the hates and fears of a society or a community, then we may begin

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to speak of justice. What people love will determine which justice they practice.

JUSTICE IN A MARKET SOCIETY?

If our shared understanding of our household begins with the story, "Once we were slaves..." (Deut. 6), our understanding and practice of justice will be decisively different from justice in the public household of the market.

■ The absolute prevailing logic of our society is the market logic. In fact, I would say it is the most pervasive logic in all the world. Karl Polanyi calls this "the market society," a society in which all the spheres, all the households in which social goods have to be distributed, are controlled by the market logic itself. Robert Heilbroner says that the character of our society, the nature of our society, is accumulation of wealth as power. The logic of our society is the exchange of commodities. Everything dances around these realities. We believe them so implicitly that we are willing to serve them and to shape our lives according to that logic.

■ The crisis for the Christian Church in North America as it confronts economic injustice is that we have allowed the Church to be absorbed too much into the market society in whose logic God's justice cannot appear. In our society we assume that justice should be distributed according to the logic of "liberty and justice for all." But how is justice actually being distributed? According to what logic? A family court judge in Dallas told me several years ago that if you do not have money, that is, something to exchange, you do not have access to justice in our American system. Israel and the Church have always known, if we have memory, that healing, learning, belonging and justice cannot be distributed according to the logic of exchange.

THE PRACTICE OF HOSPITALITY

Justice is further defined by who is included in the household and by the way they live in relation to each other. For this reason the heart of justice in the economy of God is the practice of hospitality to the stranger.

■ Just as in Paul's summation of the Christian life in Romans 12, the Torah can be summed up in the command to "practice hospitality." The way we are to relate to each other in a just community is by practicing hospitality to the stranger. This is the nature of the economy

of God we call the Church. **In Torah and Gospel economy there is born a common expectation for strangers, a hope for those whom society has systematically excluded. Love grounds our hope for those who, in the perception of society, are not due anything.**

■ God's defeat of death in Jesus Christ breaks down our morbid, self-absorbing attempts to create our own immortality. Loved and forgiven people are those who are empowered for doing justice, which means in the first place looking out for each other's interests, not just our own (Phil. 2).

THE HOUSEHOLD OF GRACE

When I was a kid, the older folks, when shown an act of kindness or given a gift, used to say, "Much obliged." I have not heard this expression for a long, long time. We live in a society in which no one wants to be much obliged because we think our freedom would thereby be destroyed. The logic of grace is that God has given God's own life for our sake and for the sake of a household in which people will not be excluded from what is necessary for life and that this gift makes us "much obliged." Our response in faith, hope and love to this gift is the work of justice.

■ The Church is a baptized community in which we are already obliged. There are things necessary for life, abundant life, which must be distributed according to the logic of gift, the logic of grace. The scriptures are full of examples in which this logic has reigned and in which life has been given to those who are included in the household of grace. The question is, do we have a memory?!! A new way of speaking of God and economy together will arise out of the Church's struggle to live by the logic of grace for the sake of an economy in which all of God's people and creatures have access to what it takes to live abundantly in God's joy.

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