

Divine Justice

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Recently a brother in Christ and dear friend renewed a long standing challenge to me to explain my view of God's justice. The occasion for this was originally given because of our differing views on the subject of, what is commonly called, Ultimate Reconciliation, Final Restoration or Christian Universalism, among other titles.

My understanding is that, historically, its more formal description is Restorationism or Apocatastasis, according to The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church, which I have in my sparse library (sparse because I have given away or thrown away literally piles of books recently while in the throes of a fresh realization that the "kingdom of God is not in word, but in power" (I Cor. 4:20), and that it is a kingdom, "in the Spirit"). And yet---I know, here I am adding more words in the hope that they proceed from the Spirit of Truth as emanations of Him who is Truth.

My friend committed himself to making something of a formal reply and/or rebuttal, feeling the issue was so central to our always respectful but lively discussions, and I plan to post his reply when I receive it. We have never allowed our disagreement to ruin our fellowship in Christ, but he has, on several occasions, strongly re-affirmed his adamant opposition to my view, and so much so, that, though I once ministered in word and song in his church with a delightfully exuberant response from the congregation, he now feels that should it become known in his denomination that I hold this conviction and that he knowingly, nevertheless, allowed me to speak or even sing, the potential for irreparable damage would be too great. There also seemed to be an accompanying fear that some kind of spiritual infestation might occur even if I avoided the subject. With that introduction let's get on with it.

When the justice of God is raised in conventional Christian circles, I think it would be accurate to say that the first, knee-jerk thought generally has to do with the idea of not being able to get away with

anything when it comes to God. And most would place the subject against the backdrop of the law's moral and ethical demands, demands which include that God not bend an inch in the matter of retribution. I think it is crucial, early on, that we make it clear that the law in its most essential form does not exist in eternity as a written code of behavior alongside God Himself. Surely one need not be pressed much to acknowledge that the primal, original form of the law is God Himself.

The Almighty has no need to refer or defer to commandments in the form of written legislation to guide divine action. He is a law unto Himself.

He is wholly, yet freely, moved by the perfection of His nature. He acts always consistent with that holy nature with impeccable and unimpeachable integrity. In short, He IS righteous, holy and yes, just. If one is inclined to make a study of the Greek words used in the New Testament which are translated as "righteous" or "just," one cannot escape the conclusion that they are at least quite overlapping, if not identical in meaning and one must approach such a study without creedal or theological presuppositions, otherwise we will thrust upon the words a meaning that is not necessarily there.

It is very possible for truly godly men to have a seriously flawed view of the meaning of righteousness (rightness) and justice (justness) so that if we begin without questioning their ideas at all we may simply promulgate convoluted theology. My intention is to trace rightness or righteousness, justice or justness back to the nature and character of God. This is necessary because we must start with the Root. The written law, we are told, was interposed, inserted; it was added because of transgressions. It was introduced to show sin as exceedingly sinful (Rom. 7:13). The law, in its written form of demanding legislation, Paul dares to say, is the power of sin (I Cor. 15:56). It is that divine instrument which, again according to Paul, provides sin with its opportunity to slay humankind (Rom. 7:11).

It was specifically given as the expressed will of God for a theocratic nation on earth. So we cannot, and dare not, limit our discussion of divine justice to the context of the Mosaic Law, or for that matter, law

generically, for Paul speaks in the same mode of thought not only of THE law, but of law without the article.

I believe there is a simple progression of godly reason, guided by the Spirit, whereby we can begin to understand God's justice without the contamination of mere convention.

We begin with the God who is right, right with Himself, with His family, with His angels and with all His creation. He is righteous. In fact He IS righteousness. Being righteous includes the fact that He is consistently just. He never violates His righteousness in His dealings with men. He is, in His rightness and justness, a good God. He is not a bad god. He is not an evil god. He is always true to that most essential characteristic of His nature which is love, perfect love.

Out of His very nature proceeds the character of love. Twice the apostle of restoration, John, writing to bring believers back to the true, essential understanding necessary for communion with God and one another tells us that God is love (I John 4:8,16). It is that constituent of His Spirit-Being that leads us to true understanding; that is, the love of God is self-revelatory. Love enLIGHTens us. The light which God is, is the love that He is, expressed and made known. Likewise, love, proceeding from God as light, is internalized in relationship as God becomes our life in Christ ("In Him was life and the life was the light of men" (John 1:4).

In this integrity, of which I write, God never veers from His good purpose for us all. Even in His introduction of evil into the world---and indeed none other than He was responsible for its advent---He was and is always moving toward the ultimate good of sharing His glory with all creation. "The knowledge of the glory of the Lord shall cover the earth as the waters cover the sea" (Hab. 2:14). "The earth is the Lord's and the fulness thereof and all its inhabitants" (Psalm 24:1). "I have given them the glory that I had with Thee before the world was" (John 17:24). "And the glory which Thou hast given Me I have given to them; that they may be one, just as We are one; ...that the world may know...." (John 17:22-23).

Divine justice proceeds out from the ultimate intention (See End Note "A"), of the Father, His intention that all creation enjoy and express His glory. Having desired, foreordained, purposed, predestined and

willed that His sons manifest Him fully to a waiting creation and having, Himself, subjected all of creation to futility, not of its own will but by the will of Him who subjected it, and having consigned (penned up) all to disobedience that He might have mercy on all, He now acts JUSTLY through his sons ACCORDING TO HIS WILL, according to that will which is not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance (II Pet. 3:9).

This, which seems to the carnal mind to be horrible ambiguity, is in fact the wisdom of God whereby he plows the soil of natural humanity through the instrumentation of evil so that the Seed of the Father of Glory might take root by grace. It must be by grace. Herein is the essential insight into the mystery of iniquity (II Thes. 2:7).

So what does divine justice demand? The demand of divine justice is the demand of perfect love. It requires that we share the very glory of God and it provides what it requires. It provides a cross so that God, who authored so great a plan, made it happen even though it required His humiliation on a hill called Golgotha "....in accordance with the eternal purpose which He carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Eph.

3:11 NAS). Did you get that? He carried it out in Christ. Check every translation that you care to, and the meaning is the same in all of them (except for the King James, but thankfully the New King James gets it right translating it "realized in Christ Jesus").

Other translations agree with the New King James, saying that He carried it out; He accomplished it; He brought it to pass.

Justice demanded this and nothing less, for justice is not a retaliatory reaction by God to man's disobedience; it is not the reaction of petulant perfection. It is the called-for action of God that brings to pass the purpose of His love. Justice must not be seen as that which stands in opposition to the deepest desire of God, but rather as the just action of God which brings His pleasure to pass.

You say, "But some men reject it, they reject Him and all that He did. Justice demands that they be excluded." Or maybe you say, "It is not God who excludes them, they exclude themselves." Why, how terribly sad then that, in spite of the declaration of Holy Writ, the eternal purpose in fact is not accomplished in Christ and will not be. Dear one, is it I who miss the meaning of the cross? Was not Calvary the

final, ultimate and collective rejection of God? And did not God, right there in the midst of human infamy, reject their rejection and receive the very ones who rejected Him?

Was that not the demonstration of the heart of God? The issue is not man's rejection of God, it is God's acceptance of man in Christ. Does God accept a man because that man accepts Him? No, God accepts us in Christ and because of Christ, and this divine initiation plays itself out in our acceptance of our acceptance in Him.

Evangelicals love to elevate the act of "accepting" Christ, but scripture bases our acceptance of Him upon His acceptance of us. "Accepted in the beloved" (Eph. 1:6). We are accepted with such overwhelming passion that finally there is nothing for the human heart to do but cry "Yes, Jesus is Lord." You see, the fact that Yeshua (Savior) is Lord, means that salvation rules in God's dealings with men.

But you may insist that there is no chance for salvation after death, as if chance had anything to do with salvation.

Where, I pray, do you find that in scripture?

Where do you find it written that God only deals with men salvifically in the brief span of their earthly life? Almost always, the unthinking answer is: "It is appointed unto men once to die and after this the judgment" (Heb. 9:27). Yes, after this the judgment, not certain banishment from the presence of God forever. What can judgment mean except the non-negotiable stance of God regarding His desire, pleasure, purpose and will? What can judgment mean other than the edict of God that exclusion, even self-exclusion, is not an option since He is the God "who will have all men to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth" (I Tim. 2:4).

It is God's rectifying insistence that His will be carried out leading to His compassion that does not leave us with confrontation, but mercifully does for us and in us that which He insists upon. This judgment is backed by the power of perfect love that casts out fear and which solves the problem of all men, all their lives, being in bondage to the fear of death (Heb. 2:15).

"God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself, not imputing their sins against them" (II COR. 5:19). Settled, done, and done JUSTLY.

Of course men must believe. One of Jesus' several metaphors for faith was "come unto me" (Matt. 11:28), and He clearly said that if He was lifted up from the earth, speaking of the manner of His death, He would draw all men to Him (John 12:32). Check the context of the whole Gospel of John in which that statement is recorded and then ask whether or not He really meant all.

It seems clear to this follower of Christ that an essential question is whether justice stands as part of the sequential conveyance of God's grace to man or does it stand in the way, protesting that man has not done his part to make grace work. "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves it is the gift of God" (Eph. 2:8).

The Bible speaks of faith as a gift and glories in that fact that the Gentiles have been "granted" repentance; granted a change of mind and heart. Salvation is God's decision, and it is a just decision. Man is granted participation in that decision "...for God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ" (I Thes. 5:9). When we "make a decision for Christ," the decision originates with God and becomes our decision as a gift from God and is the individual's subjective experience of the beginning of that process by which God becomes all and in all.

Stay tuned for future serious, seminal samplings.

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