

JUSTICE FOR ALL

Lincoln Park Baptist Church, West Newton, Massachusetts
January 3, 1965

Introduction:

In many pulpits in America, ministers, priests and rabbis will be preaching or have preached this weekend on the subject of individual liberties or justice for the individual in our society. Many will have touched on the first amendment to the constitution:

“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof, or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.”

Others may have touched on the Declaration of Independence:

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among man, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.”

Anyone who has studied American history and the political and philosophical ideas of the 18th century soon realizes that the Declaration of Independence and our Constitution reflect the political ideologies current in Europe and England in that century. It would be wrong to say that the Constitution is a Christian document. Many of the people who shared those ideas did not identify themselves with the Christian church in a direct way.

However, it would be equally wrong to deny that many believing Christians helped to shape these documents. At any rate, our Constitution is the legal instrument that our nation employs to insure justice to all the people. This is especially true in connection with the Bill of Rights in which definite restrictions are placed on government in respect to –

- freedom of religion
- free speech
- freedom of the press
- right of people to assemble peaceably
- petition to redress grievances

I. Why have we given such preeminence to the individual and to individual liberties in our society? (apart from other views)

A. Man created in the image of God

- (1) Different from the rest of creation; above the vegetable and animal kingdoms
- (2) Capacity to see transcendent meaning in life, in terms of culture, in his family
- (3) Capacity to respond to the pull of the Eternal.

B. What Christ has done for us:

- God has seen our misery and loved us in Christ.
- Since we have seen Christ as the one who came from God, we cannot despise any human being.
- Every man is precious in God's sight.
- We love the brethren because Christ first loved us.

II. Why is law necessary to regulate the relationship between man and man – between societies?

Law is an expression of love. Some people say that love cannot be legislated. However, if genuine love in the Christian sense of self-giving really exists in the heart of the believer and in the mind of the church, the least that love can do is to assure the rights of all.

We should be thankful for the legal devices in our society that guarantee that men will be treated as equals in the courtroom, in employment opportunities, in housing opportunities, in lodging opportunities.

The least that love can do is to grant every man and woman an opportunity to develop his capacities and to enhance his personality. Within the realm of society, love cannot manifest itself, except through law.

Law and order are absolutely essential in order to safeguard us from the evil of misguided love – which usually is self-love and self-interest. When the relationship between groups is at stake, only legal structures can carry through the intent of love.

III. Worship and justice

A. God despises worship without justice. Worship without justice is a mockery.

Amos 5:21 ff:

“I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.

Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and cereal offerings,

I will not accept them, and the peace offerings of your fatted beasts,

I will not look upon.

Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen,

But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an overflowing stream.

What does this say to us? What are our offerings? What are our songs, our prayers? What about communion? Worship without justice is a mockery.

- B. This is the same message of the N.T. *“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.”*

Conclusion:

- A. Our nation has produced much in terms of social justice:
 -- Progressivism at the beginning of the century – Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson,
 -- Child labor laws,
 -- Legislation to regulate the meat-packing industry [*The Jungle* by Upton Sinclair]
- B. Today, the rights of minorities: (1) negroes, (2) Indians, (3) Puerto Ricans.
 Civil Rights Law.
- C. The best contribution we can make to the nation is to be Christian in the best sense of the term. See justice as the manifestation of love. Ex. Reinhold Niebhur in Detroit; Jesus; Christians.

“But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an overflowing stream.”

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