

# Justice and Social Order

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# Foreword

Few words are more current than “justice” and “injustice,” yet who knows what justice is? Who can say what is just and what unjust? Nobody can say what justice is, we are told, because justice is a relative thing. But the judge and the legislator should know what a just penalty or a just law is; the employer should know what just wages are; mankind to-day should know whether communism or capitalism is the just economic order; whether the totalitarian State or the liberal State is the just political order. Every would-be Christian has to face the question whether interest, so-called unearned income, is just. Where are we to find a standard by which these questions may be answered if we are ignorant of the very principle of justice? Mankind to-day does not know what that principle is, but Christians might know it. While the Catholic Church, drawing on centuries of tradition, possesses an impressive systematic theory of justice, Protestant Christianity has had none for some three hundred years past. That may sound a bold statement; it can, unfortunately, be proved. It is doubtless one of the main reasons why the Protestant Church is so unsure of itself in questions of the social order, economics, law, politics and international law, and why its statements on these subjects are so haphazard and improvised that they fail to carry conviction.

If this is indeed the case, there is no need to justify the attempt to establish a doctrine of justice on Protestant principles. There is urgent need of such a doctrine at a time which has not only seen its whole social order shaken to the foundations, but has also lost any sense of what justice is. The fact that we have so long lacked a doctrine of justice may serve to extenuate the imperfections of this first attempt. In particular, the second part presents many a point of attack to criticism, and cannot fail to lay the author open to the charge of dilettantism. But who could hope

to have secure and expert knowledge in all these fields? After all, every one of the questions raised involves whole branches of science, in which the individual can hardly hope to gain a general view, and yet these are questions in which practical experience, and not science, would appear to have the last word. Who shall venture to speak on all these questions at once?

There are, however, in the world of mind and spirit, things that simply have to be ventured. The world cannot wait until its men of science have concluded their researches and are in a position to assert unanimously what is just. Protestant Christians, moreover, have a right to be instructed by their Christian leaders, whether theologians, philosophers or statesmen, as to what is required in the name of social and political justice on the basis of the Christian faith. We are, after all, convinced that the foremost requirement of our day is justice. Must we not first know what we mean, and why we mean it, when we say that the just, justice, is our foremost need? The attempt, therefore, had to be made.

This attempt, however, lays no claim to exhaustive treatment of the individual problems. It only sets forth what is required as just by Christian faith in each field. Hence a thousand questions are raised in the course of the consideration of these problems, only to be left unanswered. Many justified points of view are not taken into account, many pronouncements of weight unquoted. Indeed, what is quoted and what omitted, what views illustrate an argument and what not, is to a certain extent a matter of chance. In the main, however, the course laid down is strictly followed. In Part I we are concerned with the discovery of principles; in Part II the principles discovered are applied to some of the most vital domains of life in which the question of justice is particularly important. But this book can be regarded only as a first step. I trust that the day is not far distant when Protestant jurists, sociologists and economists will continue and improve on these inadequate beginnings. I shall be perfectly satisfied with their assurance that this book offers at least a useful basis for further work.

I owe, however, a special word of apology to the historians. The problem of justice, as we see it to-day, must always be grasped, as a whole and in detail, on the great background of European

history. That necessitates certain schematic generalizations which must be almost intolerable to the scientific historian, with his predilection for the multitudinousness of history, for the fine shades of historical personality. I can only plead in extenuation that even historians are, on occasion, driven to similar violent foreshortenings.

Finally, the purpose of this book is not primarily theoretical, but practical, as all theological work should be. Its aim is not contemplation, but action. But the basis of its belief is that all action must proceed from knowledge. A knowledge of “the just” on a clear and firm foundation is a first, and even indispensable, step towards putting justice into action. My present office as Rector of the University should, perhaps, have withheld me from writing this book at the present time, but who can refrain from writing when he feels he must write? And who can deny that it is high time for anyone with anything to say on the subject of justice to do so?

Zurich.  
September, 1943.

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