

SIZEMORE LECTURES I: Isaiah and Social Justice



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Reading and studying the Bible may not be so straightforward for readers with a *modern* and *western* background in culture and language. The biblical texts in origin are *ancient* and *eastern*: they come from a different culture and a different time.

The normal pattern in Hebrew literature is to consider topics in a recursive manner. This approach seems monotonous and repetitive to those who do not know and understand how these texts communicate. Normally a Hebrew author begins a discourse on a particular topic, develops it from a particular perspective and ends, shutting down that conversation. Next he begins another conversation, taking up the *same topic again* from a different point of view. When these two conversations or discourses on the same topic are heard in succession, they are like the left and right speakers of a stereo system. Do the speakers of a stereo system give the same music or do they give different music? The answer is *both* different *and* the same. In one sense the music from the left speaker is identical to that of the right, yet in another way it is slightly different, so that the effect is stereo instead of just one dimensional. Just so, in Hebrew literature, the ideas being discussed can be experienced like 3D IMAX photography with Dolby Surround Sound, or like considering holographic ideas.

This pattern in Hebrew literature functions both on the macro as well as on the micro level. Individual sentences are placed back to back like left and right speakers. Also paragraphs and even larger sections of texts are treated the same way. If a speaker or writer has several topics in mind

and plans to treat each one at least twice, then one can arrange them in what is called a chiasmatic fashion. For example, if I have topics A and B, and I will present each one twice, I have A and A', B and B'. However instead of using the order A B A' B', I can present them in the order A B B' A'. In this way the two topics are arranged so that the second paragraph is a mirror image of the first. This is called a chiasmatic pattern because when one looks at the Greek letter *chi* (χ), the bottom half is a perfect mirror image of the top half. A nice example is in Isaiah 6 where Yahweh explains to Isaiah what will happen during his long ministry of preaching:

Make the heart of this people dull,
and their ears heavy,
and blind their eyes;
lest they see with their eyes,
and hear with their ears,
and understand with their hearts,
and turn and be healed. (Isa. 6:10, ESV)

In the first half we have the order heart, ears, and eyes; in the second half we have the order eyes, ears, and heart: A B C :: C' B' A'. In just a moment we will see how important it is to grasp these literary patterns in the Hebrew Bible.

Few scholars today treat the book of Isaiah as a literary unity. Methods of studying the text are heavily influenced by the rationalism of the Enlightenment Period and focus on modern and western literary approaches instead of ancient and eastern methods of literary analysis. As a result, most of the commentaries are focused on grammatical and lexical details of individual words and phrases with the result that no larger picture of the whole book emerges from their labors.

In my approach to the text I have asked the question, "What were the Hebrews' own methods and rules for telling stories? And how did the authors of that culture and time construct their works?" Based on this approach, it is possible to discern a central theme for the book of Isaiah as a whole and to divide the book into seven separate sections where Isaiah goes around the same topic like a kaleidoscope, looking at it from different perspectives.

Barry Webb is one scholar who has taken the unity of Isaiah seriously and has argued persuasively that the book as a whole centers around the theme of corruption and social injustice in the City of Zion in the 8th century B.C. leading to divine judgment, and a vision of a future re-

newed Zion.¹ Chapter 1 details the idolatrous worldview gripping Jerusalem and the corruption in society resulting from it. The covenant made between God and Israel at Sinai and Moab describes curses and judgement for the covenant violation on the part of the people. After the judgement, however, God will remake, renew, restore, and transform Zion and Chapter 2 envisions this future Zion as a mountain dwarfing all others to which all the nations will stream to receive instruction (*tôrâ*) from Yahweh on behavior and lifestyle. Then in Chapters 3 and 4 Isaiah goes around the same topic again, indicting Jerusalem for social injustice and ending with a glorious vision of the future Zion. He depicts the road from judgment to a future City of Zion characterized by righteousness in the language of a New Exodus. Just as God brought his people out of bondage in Egypt after 430 years, so he will bring them out of their slavery to sin and chronic covenant infidelity into a new covenant community and creation. This New Exodus will be bigger and better than the first. The next section runs from Chapter 5 to 12 and begins to develop the same themes a third time in the context of a military and political crisis in Judah. Assyria, the sleeping giant, had awakened and was expanding west towards Syria and then south into Palestine. The countries of Syria with its capital in Damascus and the Northern Kingdom of Israel with its capital in Samaria were putting pressure on the little Kingdom of Judah in the South to join them in an anti-Assyrian coalition. The plan of King Ahaz of Judah was to become a vassal or client-king of Tiglath Pileser III of Assyria (called Pul in the Bible) and appeal to Assyria to fend off his Israelite and Aramaean enemies to the North. This section also ends by focusing on a future Messiah—a coming King—and the New Exodus, giving us a glorious vision of the new world and his rule there.

As we might expect, this third section—chapters 5–12—begins by developing further the accusations of the loss of social justice. We might also expect that by this time Isaiah’s audience would have had enough of his message. So this time, in order to make sure his audience participates, Isaiah presents his message in the form of a parable. The approach to his audience is similar to how Nathan the prophet approached King David when the Lord sent him to the King to confront him about his adultery with Bathsheba and murder of her husband Uriah. There too, Nathan used a parable to get audience participation from the king and have David condemn himself with his own righteous anger.

¹ Barry G. Webb, “Zion in Transformation: A Literary Approach to Isaiah.” In *The Bible in Three Dimensions: Essays in Celebration of Forty Years of Biblical Studies in the University of Sheffield* edited by D. J. A. Clines, Stephen E. Fowl, and Stanley E. Porter, 65-84 (JSOT Supplement Series 87. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990).

As we focus our attention on chapter 5, it is extremely important to observe the literary structure. Here we want to ask the question: what is the form in which this message is given to us? What is the shape of the text? This question is as important as the music that is composed to go along with the lyrics. Lyrics alone do not convey the entire message; the message is also conveyed by the music that is written for the lyrics.

Outline of Isaiah 5:1-30

- I. Song of the Vineyard 5:1-7
 - A. A Story of a Vineyard and Its Fruit 1-2
 - B. The Listeners Asked for a Verdict 3-4
 - C. The Decision of the Owner 5-6
 - D. The Application to Judah 7
- II. Bad Grapes: Indictment of God's People 5:8-24
 - A. Round # 1 (5:8-17)
 1. Woe: Land-Grabbing (8-10)
 2. Woe: Partying and Revelry (11-12)
 - a. Therefore # 1 (13)
 - b. Therefore # 2 (14-17)
 - B. Round # 2 (5:18-24)
 3. Woe: Mocking Divine Justice (18-19)
 4. Woe: Inverting God's Standards (20)
 5. Woe: Self-Approved Wisdom (21)
 6. Woe: Partying and Inverting Social Justice (22-23)
 - a. Therefore # 3 (24)

III. The Vineyard Ravaged: Announcement of Punishment (5:25-30)

A. The Final Therefore (5:25)

Chapter five is divided into three sections. The first is a parable or song about a vineyard in verses 1 – 7. The second section goes from verses 8 – 24 and applies the parable to the people of Judah and Jerusalem in Isaiah’s time. The last section describes the coming judgment: God will bring a distant nation to conquer and destroy them and their way of life.

The Song of the Vineyard in the opening section can be briefly summarised. The parable is divided into four stanzas. The first stanza relates in song a story of a farmer preparing a vineyard and expecting good vintage. Instead, he is met by rotten, stunted grapes.² In the second stanza, the listeners are asked for a verdict. The third part confirms the rhetorical question posed in the second stanza by relating the decision of the owner of the vineyard. He will do exactly as the listeners expect him to do: he will destroy this useless fruit orchard. Then comes the punch line of the parable and what a great shock it is. The parable is applied to Judah and Jerusalem in the last stanza: they are the bad grapes!

Verses 8 – 24, which I have entitled “Bad Grapes,” constitute a damning indictment of the people of God. A series of six woes detail and specify the bad grapes indicated in verses 2 and 4 of the parable. The literary structure is the clue to the meaning of the text. The key words are ‘woe’ and ‘therefore’. ‘Woe’ is a key word used to describe and identify the sins for which the people will be punished. ‘Therefore’ is a key word used to detail the divine punishment for these specific sins. The punishment is based squarely upon retributive justice since this is the main principle of the Torah. Notice, however, how these woes are presented. First there are two ‘woes’ in v. 8 and v. 11 which are followed by two ‘therefores’ in verses 13 and 14. Then there are a series of four more ‘woes’ in verses 18, 20, 21, and 22 given in staccato fashion like rapid gun shots. This is followed by another ‘therefore’ in v. 24. The word therefore divides the woes into two groups: here Isaiah in typical Hebrew literary style is going around the topic twice from two different angles or points of view.

² Nogah Hareuveni explains *beushim* (bad grapes) as a specific stage of development in the growth of the grapes when they cease being embryonic but have not yet ripened. A disease called *zoteret* strikes vineyards and prevents grapes from ripening, leaving them in the stunted stage of *beushim*. This explanation is from Mishna *Ma’asrot* 1.2 and the Jerusalem Talmud. See N. Hareuveni, *Tree and Shrub in our Biblical Heritage*, 70-73.

The section indicting the people of God is then followed by an announcement of imminent punishment. This last paragraph is introduced by a conjunction which also means ‘therefore’, but the word in Hebrew is different because this is the big “therefore” (עַל-כֵּן) which takes up the three little “therefores” (לָכֵן) in the previous verses (13, 14, 24).

Consequently the six woes are divided into two groups: two in the first group and four in the second. At the heart of all of them is the violation of social justice as is indicated by the last line of verse 7—the punch line of the parable—where we have the word pair justice and righteousness.

Now according to the Hebrew poetry—which is based upon placing lines in parallel pairs—justice is matched in the first line by righteousness in the second. Normally in prose when the words justice and righteousness are coordinated, they form a single concept or idea: best expressed in English by the term social justice. This is a figure of speech known as a hendiadys, one concept expressed through two words. The word-pair becomes an idiom expressing a single thought that is both different and greater than just putting the two words together. Just as one cannot analyse ‘butterfly’ in English by studying ‘butter’ and ‘fly’, so one cannot determine the meaning of this expression by analysing ‘justice’ and righteousness’ separately. Hebrew poetry, however, allows such a word-pair to be split so that half is in one line of the couplet and half in the parallel line. The word pair justice and righteousness is central to the discourse of Isaiah and occurs some eighteen times, always at key points in the discourse.³

Just like the bible scholars and religious leaders who came to Jesus and asked him “which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” so already in the Old Testament, many years earlier, as Isaiah and the other prophets sought to apply the covenant with Moses and Israel to their situation and times, they found new ways to condense and summarise in a single sentence or even phrase the apparently unwieldy mass of commands and instructions in the Torah.⁴ Even the Ten Words / Commandments upon which some six hundred or so instructions are based could be

³ Some 18 or 19 instances of the word-pair ‘justice–righteousness’, frequently split over poetic parallelism, occur in Isaiah: 1:21, 1:27, 5:07, 5:16, 9:06(7), 11:04, 16:05, 26:09, 28:17, 32:01, 32:16, 33:05, 51:05, 56:01, 58:02(2x), 59:04, 59:09, 59:14. In 11:04, 51:05 and 59:04, verbal forms of the root *šāp̄hat* are employed instead of the noun *mišpāt*; the instance in 51:05 is not listed in the rather exhaustive and excellent study of Leclerc although it appears as valid as the instance in 11:04. See Thomas L. Leclerc, *Yahweh is Exalted in Justice: Solidarity and Conflict in Isaiah* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), esp. pp. 10-13, 88, 157.

⁴ See Matthew 22:36–40.

further condensed and summarised. An example is the famous passage in Micah 6:8, “what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”

The heart of Isaiah’s message is that the covenant between God and Israel given by Moses at Sinai is broken. He summarises this covenant, consisting of the Ten Commandments and the Judgments in Exodus 20-23, using expressions or idioms for social justice and faithful loyal love, or being truthful in love. This can be described and illustrated from Isaiah’s prophecy in 16:5:

In *love* a throne will be established;
 in *faithfulness* a man will sit on it—
 one from the house of David—
 one who in judging seeks *justice*
 and speeds the cause of *righteousness*. (NIV)

In contrast to the regime of the kings of Isaiah’s time, a future king is promised who will rule in justice and righteousness. Again, like verse 7 of chapter 5, we have the word-pair split so that half is in one line of the couplet and half in the parallel line. Similarly, in the first half of the verse, we have ‘love’ (*hesed*) in the first half of the couplet and ‘faithfulness’ (*’emet*) in the second half. This is another word-pair which is focused on fulfilling one’s obligations and doing what is right in a covenant relationship (such as marriage).

Now, Isaiah’s promise of a future king in 16:5 is based upon Deuteronomy 17. Verses 16–20 of Deuteronomy 17 describe the manner in which the future king of Israel is to fulfill his responsibilities. Three negative commands in verses 16 – 17 are followed by three positive commands in verses 18 – 20—all relating to Torah: (1) the king shall copy the Torah; (2) the king shall have the Torah with him; and (3) the king shall read the Torah.⁵ In other words, the only positive requirement is that the king embodies Torah as a model citizen. This is exactly what Isaiah is saying in 16:5, only he employs the concept “social justice,” expressed by the broken word pair “justice-righteousness” as a *summary* for the Torah. Deuteronomy calls for a king who implements the Torah

⁵ I am indebted to Daniel I. Block for the privilege of consulting a preliminary version of his new commentary, *Deuteronomy*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012). Part of his research is available in Daniel I. Block, “The Burden of Leadership: The Mosaic Paradigm of Kingship (Deut. 17:14–20),” in *How I Love Your Torah, O LORD! Studies in the Book of Deuteronomy* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2011), 118–139 (originally published in *Bibliotheca Sacra* 162 [2005]: 259–278).

in his regime, and Isaiah predicts a king who will deliver social justice in his rule. They are saying the same thing.

We should note in passing that the word *Torah* is poorly translated by the English word ‘law’. Many Christians think of *Torah* mainly as Law, i.e. the Law of Moses. Two important facts should shape our thinking about *Torah*: first, the Hebrew word *tôrâ* means ‘direction’ or ‘instruction’, not law; second, these ‘instructions’ are given in the form of a covenant, not a law treatise. The *Torah*, then, is unlike any law code in the ancient Near East. It is a set of directions for living in the context and framework of a covenant relationship. The *Torah* is God instructing his children as a father in a family or as a husband in a marriage relationship—a relationship of faithfulness, loyalty, love, trust, and obedience. It is not a code of laws or requirements that are imposed generally upon human society by an impersonal authority. Here I use the word ‘instruction’ and ‘*Torah*’ interchangeably to try and keep these truths in focus.

The meaning of the word pair “justice-righteousness” both as an *expression* for social justice and as a *summary* of the instruction in the covenant is clearly illustrated, in particular in chapter 5, in the series of six woes divided into two separate conversations or groups. In verse 7, the word pair “justice-righteousness” broken or split over parallel lines is not only the punch-line for the parable, it is also the headline for the next section, showing that the violation of social justice is at the heart of all six woes. In the first woe the prophet thunders about land-grabbing: “Woe to those who add house to house and field to field” (5:8). The second woe (5:11) condemns the partying of the *nouveaux riches*, because the money for these parties came from mistreating the poor and vulnerable. The final four woes are all ways of elaborating the original charge of perverting social justice. The last woe is the climax and summarizes by combining the two original charges of gaining wealth by social injustice and living a life of pleasure to spend that wealth. Between the two groups of woes Isaiah announces punishments based upon the retributive justice of the covenant / *Torah*.

In the first round, as we have seen, the woe of v. 8 has to do with greedy grabbing of land while the woe of v. 11 has to do with partying and revelry. Partying and revelry occupied the leisure time of the rich and resulted from the wealth generated by mistreating the poor and vulnerable.

In the second round, the last four woes are actually a repetition of the first two in recursive development of the topic. The third woe talks about the upper classes carrying a burden of sin bound by big ropes of deceit and mocking God by calling upon him to hurry up with the judgment which he has promised. The fourth woe shows that the system of virtue and vice, of right and wrong, is completely inverted in this society. The

fifth woe accuses the people of depending on self-approved knowledge and skill. They are confident in and relying on their technology and mastery of the powers of nature. I remember well when we first heard of AIDS around 1979. In the early 1980s, the attitude in North America was, just give us enough time and a better technology and we will beat this—an example of relying on our own technology.

The woes, then, are all ways of elaborating the original charge of perverting social justice. The last woe is the climax and summarizes by combining the two original charges of gaining wealth by social injustice and living a life of pleasure to spend that wealth. In this way the last four woes elaborate the original two indictments. These indictments and the punishments that result are based entirely upon the retributive justice of the Torah, the Covenant made at Sinai. The penalty always matches exactly the crime. The wrong-doer must repay as much as but no more than the wrong done.

The economic and social situation addressed by Isaiah in Chapter 5 signals the breakdown of conventions governing ownership of property.⁶ Prior to the monarchic period, Israelite economy was based on farming and shepherding. Property was inherited and preserved within **clans**—a kin group between the extended family and the tribe. Diverse instructions in the Mosaic Covenant were given to preserve economic equilibrium in ownership of property and protect the poor and powerless, e.g. laws concerning boundary markers,⁷ the inheritance rights of females,⁸ levirate marriage,⁹ *gō'el* responsibilities,¹⁰ and jubilee / sabbatical years.¹¹ Two factors brought changes to this social system: monarchy and urbanization. With the advent of kingship, land could be acquired by the crown: sometimes corruptly as in the case of Naboth's vineyard (1 Kings 21) and sometimes legally through the confiscation of the estates of criminals and traitors. Thus, a family inheritance could be enlarged by a royal grant. Samuel warned about this in 1 Sam 8:14-15. Recipients of such royal largesse would live in the capital city and eat every day at the king's table, all the while enjoying the revenue of their amassed holdings. In this way, important nobles and officials, especially those who in-

⁶ This description of the background to the social situation in Isaiah 5 is adapted from and based upon Thomas L. Leclerc, *Yahweh is Exalted in Justice: Solidarity and Conflict in Isaiah* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 59-60, who brings together many seminal studies on the topic.

⁷ Deut. 19:14, 27:17.

⁸ Num. 26:33, 27:1-11, 36:1-13.

⁹ Deut. 25:5-10, Ruth 4:5, 10.

¹⁰ Redemption of property (Lev. 25:23-28), of persons (25:47-55), of blood (Num. 35), levirate marriage (Ruth 4:5, 10) by the nearest relative.

¹¹ Leviticus 25.

gratiated themselves to the king and his henchmen, were in a position to acquire by legal and illegal means the property of those vulnerable to oppression.

On the other hand, the development and growth of cities created new ties between peasant farmers and a new class of merchants who usually lived in the towns and influenced public affairs. When a farmer suffered economic setbacks from crop failure due to drought or locusts, for example, he would turn to a merchant or moneylender in town. He would either be charged interest for a loan or be forced to cultivate land belonging to others on a share-cropping or tenant basis. We have documents from the Jewish community in Elephantine (Aswan), Egypt from the fifth-century B.C. that mention Jews who had to pay interest rates of 5 percent per month. When unpaid interest is added to the capital, the average annual rate is sixty percent.¹²

As agricultural plots become the property of a single owner (perhaps an absentee landlord who is a city dweller), as peasants become indentured serfs or even slaves, and as their goods and services are received as payments on loans, the gap between the rich and poor widens. Since land ownership translates into economic and political power, issues of property rights and taxes, as well as laws concerning bankruptcy, foreclosures and loans, fall into the hands of the rich, thus aiding and abetting a gap in power as well.

The situation which Isaiah condemns is graphically portrayed: large estates amassed by adding field to field on which sit “large and beautiful homes” (5:9b). The acquisition of land comes as debts are foreclosed and the property is expropriated. Since all of this is done according to the laws of the marketplace and by statute, it is all strictly legal—but utterly immoral and violates the social justice of the Torah. This is a powerful demonstration of the parable of the vineyard at work: everything looks legal and proper on the outside, but on closer inspection shows that the grapes are rotten, stinking and stunted. The image of a landowner dwelling all alone in the midst of the country is a picture of great horror. While American society idolizes and praises rugged individualism, ancient Israel valued the community over the individual. The interests of the group were more important than those of a single individual, no matter how clever or skilled and talented the entrepreneur. It is difficult, therefore, for us to feel the horror of ending up as a society of one.

And so the rich and luxuriant lifestyle of the upper class grows even as the poor get poorer. The punishment therefore fits the crime: the fine homes will become desolate and uninhabited (5:9), and the fields so rav-

¹² If one considers compounded (or unpaid) interest, the rate would be higher.

enously acquired will be blighted (5:10). The same retribution is expressed in v. 17 when the prophet goes round the topic a second time.

The second woe describes the lifestyle of the growing upper class. The accumulated wealth frees the gentry, landowners, from the necessity of working and allows them to enjoy a carefree and self-indulgent life. After the property and fine homes, the most conspicuous sign of this detached and carefree life is feasting and drinking—drinking literally from morning to night—is twice decried (5:11, 22). Their fine feasts are accompanied by small orchestras—lyre and lute, tambourine and flute. Again, the punishment is directly matched to the offense. V. 13 says, “their nobility are poor wretches famished with hunger and their multitude are parched with thirst.”

The chapter ends without a shred of hope. In the last paragraph, God whistles to summon a distant nation who then brings a war machine across the desert that is so disciplined and powerful that there will be no escape. It reminds one of the troops of Sauron at the Gates of Mordor in *Lord of the Rings*.

The literary structure is key to correct interpretation. The last four woes and following ‘therefore’ are an expansion upon the first two woes and the two climactic ‘therefores’ that follow them. The literary structure, then, shows that vv. 15-16 are both climactic and central as summaries of the condition of Israel and her situation before God:

So humanity is humbled and mankind is brought low,
and the eyes of the haughty will be brought low,
but the Lord of Hosts is exalted in justice,
and the Holy God shows himself holy in righteousness.¹³

Although the elite in Israel are enjoying the high life, they will be brought low and brought to recognize one who is truly exalted and high: Yahweh of Armies. He is exalted because he shows himself holy in justice and righteousness. The word-pair for social justice split over parallel lines is found once more at this crucial juncture in the text, just as it was found in v. 7, the punch-line of the parable.

What does it mean for God to show himself holy in justice and righteousness? This is the topic for Part II and so we end on a cliff-hanger.

Nonetheless, we need to apply this teaching on social justice. There is a debate among Christians today about how the message of social justice relates to the gospel. Is social justice at the heart of the gospel message or is it related to it in some secondary way?

¹³ Translation that of H. G. M. Williamson, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Isaiah 1-27* (New York: T & T Clark, 2006), 1:356-357.

Three important perspectives will give us balance in our thinking on this topic. First, I am using the term social justice in a different way from the way it is commonly used in America. A renowned professor of Ethics wrote an article recently published in *Time Magazine*.¹⁴ He described how divided America has become and how this is especially seen in the recent election (2012). Americans are divided on how they define ‘fair’ and ‘just’. For some Americans, ‘fair’ means proportionality, which means that people are getting benefits in proportion to their contributions. For others fairness means equality: everyone gets the same. The third major definition of fairness is procedural fairness, which means that honest, open and impartial rules are used to determine who gets what. People and politicians in America, then, use the term social justice today in a wide variety of ways.

What we can see in the Bible, and in particular in Isaiah, is that God is bound to the nation of Israel by a covenant relationship. This covenant, made at Sinai, shows the people how to have a right relationship to God, how to treat each other in genuinely human ways, and how to be good stewards of the earth’s resources.¹⁵ Social justice is a term used by Isaiah and other prophets as a way of summarizing all the diverse instructions in the covenant. So here, the term social justice is defined by the detailed instructions in the covenant for treating other people in a genuinely human way.

Israel was a nation in covenant relationship with God and governed directly by God through her king, her prophets and her priests. America is not a Christian state in any sense of the word. This text in Isaiah does not apply directly to our state or our nation; it applies directly, first and foremost to the Church as the people of God. As we consider the heritage of America, however, we would hope for social justice in our country. Nonetheless, there are signs of the same corruption in our society even in Louisville.¹⁶ Recently I visited jails, the Main Jail in the City of Louisville and the Luther Luckett Correctional Facility out in La Grange. The room for visitors to the downtown jail holds about forty chairs. The day I was there I counted four men and the rest were women and children. All but one or two were from the lowest class of society. Is this because the rich in Louisville are not guilty of the same offenses? Hardly! One of-

¹⁴ Jonathan Haidt, “Romney, Obama and the New Culture War over Fairness,” *Time Magazine* October 8, 2012.

¹⁵ See Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), *passim*.

¹⁶ I can only speak knowledgeably about the city where I live.

fense is drunk driving.¹⁷ Surely, if a person drives a car under the influence of alcohol, this is tantamount to murder. One is almost certain to have an accident which results in the deaths of innocent people. Yet if a person gets a DUI in Louisville and they are wealthy or well-connected, they may have their license taken away for thirty days and a fine of \$100.00. Yet if they are from the lower classes, or have no connections with powerful lawyers, they may have their license suspended for up to a year and pay a fine of \$700.00. Are we really implementing justice or are we using laws to oppress the powerless? Another example is when our businesses target young people for credit cards and educational loans. Then we develop laws on interest payments, credit ratings, bankruptcy and foreclosure that enslave them. Mortgage rates are dropping again. Yet even at 5% a person who borrows \$115,000.00 will end up paying \$250,000.00 over a period of 30 years. Is it really the right of one individual to treat others in the society this way? Finally, an example from the health industry. Recently I had back problems while residing in Germany. I had to pay up front for an MRI and the cost was \$950.00 (US Dollars). A year later, I had another MRI done in Louisville. The cost was \$3,500.00 but the Explanation of Benefits Statement showed that in the end, the medical people only received \$950.00 from the insurance company. This means that the medical people know that they will be docked by the insurance people and charge accordingly so they will end up with the cost of their labors. Fair enough! But this penalizes the poor in society who have to pay \$3,500.00 for the procedure.

Second, social justice is also at the heart of the new covenant. We can say that Christians are people who are bound to God by faith in Jesus Christ, whose death and resurrection have inaugurated a new covenant. Those bound to God by faith in Jesus Christ belong to the new covenant community. Our relationship to God is not based on the Old Covenant made at Sinai, but rather on the New Covenant made at the cross. Nonetheless, the righteousness of God has not changed. Loving God and loving our neighbour as ourselves has been replaced by loving Jesus and loving others, those in the new covenant community and those outside in the world in general. Earlier we saw from Isaiah 16:5 that the prophets attempted to express this in a single sound bite. One expression was “justice and righteousness” and another was “faithfulness and love.” In the book titled *Kingdom Through Covenant* by myself and S. J. Wellum there is an entire chapter on Ephesians 4:15 where I show that when Paul calls believers in Jesus Christ to act truthfully in love or speak the truth

¹⁷ In 2010, about 75 people were killed on the highways of the city of Toronto and 1000 in the entire state of Kentucky. There are also more people in Toronto than in the entire state of Kentucky. A high percentage of deaths on the road in Kentucky are due to drunk driving.

in love, he is showing that social justice is at the centre, the heart of the new covenant just as it was in the Old.¹⁸



The claim that social justice sums up the requirements of the stipulations for the new creation / new covenant community must be considered in context. These instructions are given to a people who are already justified and forgiven so that they may know how to live and treat each other in a community which models for the rest of the world life in the new creation. In Eph 1:13-14, Paul equates “the word of truth” with “the gospel of your salvation.” Nonetheless, the gospel that Paul preached included justification, daily growth in holiness both individually and in relationships in the covenant community, and final redemption. Thus there is no conflict between “speaking the truth” as social justice and “the word of truth” in terms of believing the gospel and being saved. In addition, since the character and righteousness of God expressed in the old covenant is not different from that expressed in the new covenant—although doubtless brought to fuller light and greater fullness in the new covenant—there is continuity between the social justice we see in the Old Testament and the teaching of Paul in the New.

¹⁸ Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012).

Third, and this final point flows out of the fact that social justice is an expression for summing up how to behave in both the Old and New Covenant communities, social justice is at the heart of who God is. The central statement of Isaiah Chapter 5—according to the literary structure—is verse 16:

but the Lord of Hosts is exalted in justice,
and the Holy God shows himself holy in righteousness

This verse is telling us that God wants social justice in the way we treat each other because this is who he is in himself. This is possible, as the New Testament shows, because God is a triune being—three persons in one. How can you have social justice or faithful loyal love unless there is more than one person?

For a long time in the western world, there has been a tendency to treat the Christian doctrine of the Trinity as a problem rather than as encapsulating the heart of the Christian Gospel. A recent writer put it this way: “It is as if one had to establish one’s Christian orthodoxy by facing a series of mathematical and logical difficulties rather than by glorying in the being of a God whose reality as a communion of persons is the basis of a rational universe in which personal life may take shape.”¹⁹ Do you see the situation? Our problems arise because we come to this teaching with our ideas of god, human life and personality. And then we say this teaching is illogical or puzzling. What we need to do is to start the other way round. It is only if and when we **begin** with this teaching that we can understand God and ourselves and the world in which we live. Let me illustrate. Only the Christian God explains communication, love, and social justice. For a moment we’ll talk about this in a human family. How can a child understand love or social justice if the definition of this is based entirely and totally upon the relationship of the child to the parent and the parent to the child. This is a very insecure and unstable basis for love, because the child knows that he or she may disappoint or fail father or mother. And when that happens, the love is imperfect. If, however, love is defined in a relationship outside the child-parent relationship, in the love of husband and wife, then the child knows that world of love won’t fall apart when they disobey dad or mom. There is a secure foundation for love because love is defined in a relationship outside of the child-parent relationship. The same is true of our relation to God. If faithful love or social justice depends on our relationship to God, then this love or justice is not perfect. But faithful love and social justice is

¹⁹ Colin Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1991), 31-32.

found within the being of God. Because there are personal distinctions within God himself, the eternal love of the Father for the Son and the Son for the Father, we have a basis for love and social justice. The Muslim has 99 names for God, but love is not one of them. Only the Christian faith has a basis for love in human relationships because love is based in God himself independently of our relation to him.



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