

Psalm 73

Isaac Watts (1674–1748)

Sure there's a righteous God,
Nor is religion vain;
Though men of vice may boast aloud,
And men of grace complain.

I saw the wicked rise,
And felt my heart repine,
While haughty fools, with scornful eyes,
In robes of honour shine.

Their impious tongues blaspheme
The everlasting God;
Their malice blasts the good man's name,
And spreads their lies abroad.

The tumults of my thought
Held me in deep suspense,
Till to thy house my feet were brought,
To learn thy justice thence.

Thy Word with light and pow'r
Did my mistakes amend;
I view'd the sinner's life before,
But here I learnt their end.

Lord, at thy feet I bow,
My thoughts no more repine.
I call my God my portion now,
And all my pow'rs are thine.



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In the Nick of Time

Social Justice

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All people everywhere want justice. Even a hardcore logical positivist feels a sense of injustice if you step ahead of him after hours of waiting at the Department of Motor Vehicles. The universal yearning for justice has been expressed in documents from the Code of Hammurabi and the book of Job to the American Pledge of Allegiance, which promises loyalty to the flag of a nation that provides “liberty and justice for all.”

The classical and Christian understanding of justice has been summarized in the phrase, “To each his due.” On this understanding, justice can be directed only toward persons. These persons are entitled to some things simply by virtue of their existence as persons. These things are called *rights*. To withhold what is due—i.e., to violate these rights—is to become unjust. Consequently, a right represents a claim that must be recognized by all others.

Justice is tied to a certain kind of equality. A just God is no respecter of persons, and neither is a just law or a just judge. In this sense, justice is blind: it is concerned with formal questions, not substantive ones. A just footrace is one in which all athletes must cover the same distance, not one in which they have the same stamina.

Recently, however, the word *justice* is increasingly paired with the modifier *social*. In fact, this combination—*social justice*—has become one of the incantations of the present age. One need only utter it with approbation to position one's self in a stance of moral superiority. But what is social justice, and how does it differ from ordinary justice as the West has understood it for millennia?

The main difference is that social justice is not formal, it is substantive. Social justice is sometimes called *distributive* justice because it measures justice according to distribution. It demands equality, not of standing, but of condition and outcome. Consequently, advocates of social justice assume

that wherever some imbalance exists, whether of wealth, power, education, or prestige, injustice is at work.

The first figures to advocate social justice in this sense were concerned primarily with economic imbalance, particular the imbalance between capital and labor. Because they saw this imbalance as unjust, they wanted governments to use their coercive power to remove wealth from those who had it and to increase the wealth of those who did not. In their scheme the state would become an agent of planned economic redistribution, at gunpoint if necessary. This scheme was called *socialism* in its milder forms and *communism* in those forms that advocated violent revolution.

This kind of redistribution was not justice at all. Property rights are among the rights that must be recognized and protected by true justice. For states to use the threat of violence while trampling property rights cannot be sanctioned as any kind of genuine justice.

Socialism has not been tried in all places. Where free markets and capital enterprise are allowed, virtually all classes have grown in wealth. Consequently, socialists have found it difficult to motivate the “working class” to comply with schemes of wholesale economic redistribution.

The purveyors of social justice have met this challenge in two ways. First, they have labored mightily to create a permanent underclass of individuals who will be perpetually dependent upon government largess. To create this underclass they have had to dismantle the core institutions, such as family and community, that have traditionally both helped the disadvantaged and held them accountable.

Second, they have expanded the notion of social justice to confront other forms of distributive inequality. This effort has required them to focus upon, and sometimes create, classes of victims. Advocating justice for these supposedly-victimized classes has permitted advocates of social justice to blur the lines between social justice and genuine justice.

Racial conflict provides an example. Nobody can rightly deny that African Americans have been treated with real and terrible injustice, even after slavery ended. They were denied equal privileges under the law; they were denied the exercise of genuine rights; they were victimized by beatings and even lynchings. These evils persisted almost without challenge into the second half of the Twentieth Century. These were real injustices that any moral person ought to have confronted and sought to rectify.

Martin Luther King, Jr. knew how to appeal to Americans’ sense of true justice. He spoke powerful words, words like, “I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character. I have a dream

today!” His words appealed to genuine justice, justice as traditionally understood. They spoke to the consciences and resonated in the hearts of an entire generation, regardless of race.

Nevertheless, the appeal for substantive equality (equality of condition; equality of outcome) was not far behind. Soon, if a business did not have the right number of Black executives, or a school did not have the right number of Black graduates, or a hospital did not have the right number of Black doctors, then it was assumed to be discriminating. This perspective resulted both officially and unofficially in a quota system that has injured the integrity of people in every race. What began as an appeal for true justice became mixed up with an attempt to produce equal outcomes by judging people exactly by the color of their skin rather than the content of their character.

Once this tactic gained traction in racial matters, it was quickly duplicated by feminists and applied to equal treatment for women. Then it was applied to so-called “sexual minorities” such as gays and lesbians. Most recently it is being applied to people who claim a “sexual identity” different from their “assigned” identity. In every case, the assumption is that an inequality of power, wealth, prestige, or even acceptance constitutes an injustice, and that the injustice can be corrected only by depriving the “privileged” of their advantages and redistributing this privilege through coercive power.

What is particularly alarming is the number of evangelicals who jabber about social justice. Most often these people fit into two categories. Some are using the phrase without understanding what it really means. Others believe that they can redefine the term in ways that allow them to keep using it.

But why use it at all? The reason is that “social justice” is more than a label. It is an incantation of power. Its utterance conveys one to the moral high ground. Some evangelicals want to be able to speak this Word of Power even if they don’t mean what it means.

But social justice is not justice. It is injustice. It is a mirage, a fake, a bill of goods. We would be much further ahead simply to repudiate the leadership of any individual (whether evangelical or secular) who spoke as if social justice were a desirable, an attainable, or even a real thing.



This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.
