

Biblical Justice Requires Meeting Human Needs

In the October 20 H-T, Indiana Policy Review columnist Cecil Bohanon asks, “Is redistribution biblical justice?” His answer betrays a paucity of both biblical knowledge and moral sensibility.

In the first place, Bohannon fails to grasp that redistribution of wealth and income is the one thing governments cannot avoid doing. All taxation and all government spending are forms of redistribution. In these United States of 2013, much of the current redistribution is from the middle class to the military-industrial-financial complex. That’s not biblical! But redistribution that addresses and meets basic human needs is surely as biblical as you can get.

Bohannon’s notion of justice is overly legalistic and contractual. In his mind, it seems, personal and corporate property rights trump everything else. Unmet basic human needs do not translate into rights to be met by social justice policies and practices. They are the domain of mercy and charity, and must rely upon the good graces of all who have the means. In short, the have-nots have no claim on the rest of us, but the rest of us should help the have-nots nonetheless.

In the view of Micah and other biblical prophets, however, “loving mercy” is no substitute for “doing justice,” and “doing justice” entails much more than fulfilling contractual obligations. It requires creating social arrangements and engaging in social practices that provide for everyone the means for their lives to flourish. It involves building communities and structures that nurture and sustain life together. This is not optional, nor is it voluntary as understood in our current vernacular. It must be a matter of social as well as individual practice.

It is only just that all people be afforded the food, clothing, housing, education, transportation, health care, and other basic necessities of life. Since no modern society has ever managed to do this without government involvement, it is a central obligation of all citizens, and most certainly of all Christians, to seek government leadership, support government policies, and help implement government practices that advance the well-being of all citizens, particularly those who would otherwise be deprived of the franchise of full citizenship due to their disadvantaged circumstances.

For a more extensive treatment of this matter, I refer Bohannon and his readers to the essay, “What Does God Require of Us?”, in the book, RELIGIOUS GIVING (ed. David H. Smith, IU Press, 2010). The essay may also be accessed at www.bcbangert.com/ReligiousGiving.

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