

PROTAGONIST CORNER

God's "Affirmative Action" Plan

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Last year the Supreme Court of the United States, in a "landmark decision," ordered the Medical School of the University of California at Davis to admit Alan Bakke. The Court was interpreted by some people as implicitly saying that in spite of the social, psychological and historical legacy of 400 years of slavery for Blacks, to admit a Black of lesser grade point average than White Bakke (refused admission by 13 other schools) was to subject Bakke to "reverse discrimination." This, such an argument cynically continued, was obviously inconsistent with the amendments of the American Constitution which guarantee basic freedoms and rights to all citizens—including the right not to be discriminated against on the basis of race, color, religion, or class. Proponents of this argument would reemphasize the point that it has never been a matter of national outrage for Blacks to be denied their constitutional rights in favor of others. But with Bakke, there was an hysterical outcry against "injustice." This was generated, no doubt, because for the first time in this country's history, it seemed as though it might become policy for "those who came to work late in the day to receive the same wages as those who were there early."

This decision of the highest court caused various reactions among people in the Church. These reactions reflected their different perceptions of the role of the Church in society—to withdraw from the society's "contamination," or to conform to social norms or to transform the status quo which informs those norms. In addition to these theological and ethical perspectives, another obvious factor contributing to Church people's reactions to the Bakke decision was their racial and cultural background, for people's ethnic identity figured significantly in their response to the alienating predicament precipitated by the Supreme Court's ruling.

However Christians analyze the problem of evil and alienation as to its source or product, as we look at the New Testament's doctrine of God's justice and mercy, we cannot help seeing that part of the reaction to the Bakke decision is due to the fact that there has always been a pervasive falsification of people's self-understanding as to their roles and goals in life. This is variously referred to in the Bible as the result of "deafness," "blindness," or "hardness of heart." Theologically, we would say that people have clung to illusions of being "special," "elect" for privilege and not for responsibility for justice and righteousness.

On the other hand, there are those who, in dealing with the Bakke decision, take their cue from the clear, consistent, ethical norms of love, justice, and mercy taught by Jesus as the gospel of hope for human happiness and harmony. They see what they would call "God's Affirmative Action Plan" most pointedly enunciated in the parable of the farmer who hired workers at different hours of the day and paid them all a denarius (Matthew 20:1-16). Their exegesis of this parable points to the normative principle of "love" for human social organization and function. The

parable provides a model for dealing with the dilemma of need, greed, scarcity, injustice, and inequality of access to the abundant resources of the earth.

For them, Jesus was really saying: "As you live in this world of evils, remember that the Kingdom of God, which is surely breaking in, is like what happened at sunset on a typical Palestinian vineyard, when an angry day-worker confronted the owner: 'These last worked only one hour,' he shouted, 'and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat!' But the owner replied, 'My dear friend, I am doing you no injustice; did you not agree to work for a denarius? Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge me my generosity?'"

Behind the theological insights found in the pointed question at the parable's climax, were environmental, social, and economic realities of Palestine where the grape harvest ripens toward the end of September immediately before the rains. In such a situation, harvest involves a frantic race against time. So the farmer kept going to the marketplace to hire men at various hours from dawn to five o'clock, which was one hour before the end of the normal workday. This he did because he saw after each hour's work that he needed more help to complete the harvesting. He also knew that those men who were standing around the marketplace were not streetcorner idlers "on welfare," merely passing the time in meaningless frivolities! No! In Palestinian culture the marketplace was the "union hall" where day-laborers gathered to avail themselves of work. Their situation was more precarious than that of slaves, who at least lived on the farmer's property and had access to their owner's provisions. Like our migrant workers, there was for them no guarantee of a livelihood, so when the farmer came to the marketplace at five o'clock inviting them to work for one hour for what was "fair," i.e., a small percentage of the denarius, they readily agreed.

In contrast to these cultural and economic expectations, Jesus concludes this astonishing parable in the spirit of the Year of Jubilee (Leviticus 25), saying: "Think what it must have meant for these men to have received a full day's pay, a denarius, and not just a part pay as had been agreed to and deserved! Think what it must have meant to them to take home a whole day's pay to their destitute families!" But then comes "Mr. Legal," our Alan Bakke, protesting: "These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us . . ." To which the farmer retorts, "Friend, do you begrudge my generosity? I am simply carrying out God's Affirmative Action Plan!"

Herein lies the contrast between the world of God's grace and the world of merit. The parable compares the legalism of religious people, who look for their reward, with the gospel of love and mercy seen in Jesus Christ. Jesus is saying a radical and stunning word to his disciples, to the Scribes and Pharisees, to Alan Bakke, and to all of us who bridle with indignation at "Affirmative Action Plans," Years of Jubilee, and other schemes designed to rectify perennial injustice. He is saying that God's word to the querulous Isaiah of the Exile is still applicable to us who are "hard of heart": "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways than your ways" (55:8). He is saying, "God is not some 'celestial punch-clock operator.' For if he were, your paycheck, remarkable worker that you fancy yourself to be, would be docked beyond recognition! No, God is not like that but is rather the God of mercy and grace who gives to those who come late the same wages as those who were there early."