

Sabbath Reflections 4

Capitalism and Inequity versus a Gospel Mandate

Sabbath: Embracing Jubilee

Christianity celebrated its great Jubilee, two millennia of Christian witness, in the year 2000. The world joined the Jubilee in a commitment to forgive third world debt, the crippling burden experienced by many of the world's poorest, which causes them to pay interest on loans to the first world as a priority over educating, feeding and developing their own people.¹

Jubilee is an outworking of Sabbath, a celebration of 'rest.' The biblical Jubilee (Leviticus 25) was to be celebrated every fifty years (the year following 'seven times seven'), as an occasion of restoration, the removal of inequity, and the freeing of the present from the burden of the past. In that year, the accumulation of tribal land was to be returned to its original balance. Slaves were to be set free, and equity was to be restored in every sphere of life.² In this way, the misfortune of one generation was not to be inherited by the next.

The year 2000 also celebrated this Jubilee ideal through the establishment of the Millennium Development Goals,³ goals which are to be achieved by the year 2015 and paid for through the gift of 0.7% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) from the world's richest nations.

Eradication of extreme poverty

Achievement of universal primary education

The promotion of gender equality

Reduction in child mortality

Improvement in maternal health

Combating HIV/AIDS and malaria

Ensuring Environmental sustainability

Developing global partnerships

Considerable progress has been made on many of these goals, and this progress should be celebrated.⁴ However, much still needs to be done. It is clear that by 2015 there will be a considerable shortfall. There are many reasons for this tragic situation: cultures are inherently conservative and resist change, especially in relation to women; entrenched prejudices are hard to remove; corruption is endemic; monies promised are often not forthcoming; too few of the rich nations are meeting the 0.7% target.

Today, we are experiencing the silent verdict of scripture. Jubilee is integral to the health and wellbeing of people and land, but there is little biblical evidence that it was ever practiced! The advantaged strive to hold on to their advantage, those in power are reluctant to release power, and the prevailing narrative is construed in favour of the status quo.

Jubilee was always a celebration of people and land together. People could not experience rest, if it was denied to the land.⁵ The Millennium Development Goals that focus on advancing human wellbeing will be fruitless, if they are not set in the context of

1. The 1998 Lambeth Conference Resolution V.2. *On International Debt Cancellation and the Alleviation of Poverty.*

2. For a *Yahwist* understanding of land ownership, see a commentary on the Naboth and King Ahab saga (1 Kings 21:1-16) in a paper given by Professor Timothy Gorrige of Exeter University UK entitled: *Idolatry and Redemption: Economics in Biblical Perspective.*

3. Goals agreed to by all 193 member States of the United Nations.

4. For chart of progress go to <http://mdgs.un.org/unsd/mdg/resources/progress2010>

5. In the biblical creation narrative, land is the space of human habitation. Because human activity is now all pervasive, we should understand the Jubilee principle to be equally applicable to air and water (sea).

6. World footprint: do we fit on the planet?

http://www.footprintnetwork.org/en/index.php/GFN/page/world_footprint/

7. As in Jubilee, and as in the Lord's Prayer, debt is seen as the paradigmatic social evil. John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1972) 41.

8. 'The Sabbath commandment explains all the other commandments, or all the other forms of the one commandment. It is thus to be placed at their head.' Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of Creation* 111.4 (London: T&T Clark 2009) 49.

9. 'Humankind is easily ensnared in the culture of ownership. Even if it is understood intellectually that the world is God's, and the human role of stewardship means only to have stewardship under him, people can still be caught up in the desire for possessions, which is by its nature voracious... In the midst of this, the Christian is called to stop: completely, properly for a period of time, not just to pause for breath before carrying on consuming, but to take a deep dive into God's peace.' *Church of England Mission and Public Affairs Council, Sharing the Planet*, (Church House Publishing London 2005), 27.

the seventh goal, environmental sustainability. It is now estimated that seven billion people annually expend 140% of the planet's capacity for renewal.⁶ In other words, our debt to the future is growing exponentially. One day, ecological debt⁷ must be paid; inequity cannot be sustained indefinitely without correction. How this debt will be called in and the manner of its correction is a matter of fierce scientific debate, both in its timing and in its severity. However, what we do know is that human consumption (greed) is having an effect which is in direct contravention to the biblical principle of Jubilee.

The welfare of *people* cannot be considered separately from the welfare of the *land*. Inequity must be addressed: inequity between people, as well as inequity between people and the land. Future generations must not be expected to pay for the excesses of a previous generation.

As it is expressed through Jubilee, Sabbath⁸ has a very strong ethical component, a component which cannot be avoided by those who confess discipleship of Jesus. How do we know this? We know it because Jesus announced and explained the nature of his mission by reading the Jubilee passage in the synagogue -- in relation to himself (Luke 4:16-19, Isaiah 61:1-11). Turning to Jesus, confessing Jesus as Lord is the route to life, life in all its fullness. It is equally the beginning of Christian discipleship. What then does such discipleship mean, and how do those who make the confession of faith understand the consequences? Following Jesus is to love all that Jesus loved and to embrace all that Jesus embraces.⁹

Jesus embraces Sabbath within himself: his death and resurrection fulfill all that was waiting to be fulfilled through the law (including the Sabbath law). As we journey with Jesus, the human face of the Sabbath God, we are faced with the reality that our faith is not simply to be lived out in the private world of personal belief and morality. It is also to be lived in the very public world of Jubilee, where injustice is addressed and stewardship exercised. What we have inherited must be passed on, not simply as it was, but blessed and enhanced through our temporary custodianship of it.

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

1. What progress do you see in relation to the Millennium Development Goals listed above? Check which commitments are being made by your nation. If it is inadequate, ask why.
2. In particular, what progress has been made in relation to Goal 7? Reflect upon the political narrative used by the leaders of your nation at the Rio+20 Environment and Sustainability Conference, June 2012.
3. How do you relate to land? How does Sabbath enrich this relationship?

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