

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to Insight for Living, a newsletter designed to communicate in a fresh way the Biblical insight for daily life, a life of joyful service to the Lord and our neighbour. The focus will be on contemporary issues and the way in which we are called as christians to respond to the biblical commands to seek justice and mercy, and to call for fresh obedience to the Word of God. In that Word we find God's good order for life; it provides abundant "insight for living." This newsletter will discuss political, economic and social matters, such as education, employment, legislation, and similar issues, in a way which seeks to take the Scriptures seriously, as to how they should guide us in our daily tasks, through thoughtful and informed analysis of the needs of our day.

Insight for living is published by the South Island Regional Committee of the Association for Christian Scholarship, an organisation functioning in both New Zealand and Australia, which seeks to promote the renewal of christian life, particularly as this pertains to the problems of christian scholarship in an increasingly secularised society. It was formed in 1983 by the merger of the Foundation for Christian Studies (New Zealand) and the Foundation for Christian Scholarship (Australia).

This first issue comes to you free, but we would welcome any contributions towards, the costs involved. Please fill in the enclosed form if you, wish to receive further monthly issues. We would appreciate your comments on this issue and hope that you will join us in the on-going struggle for justice and liberty for all in our fallen world, strengthened by the grace of God given richly through his Son Jesus Christ, by the on-going work of the Holy Spirit.

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HUMANITY AS A COMMUNITY CALLED TO LOVE AND SERVICE

Considerations of the christian Political task.

DUNCAN L. ROPER

The human race was created by God as a community. Everyone is inescapably a member of that community, dependent upon it and with obligations to it. That we have obligations toward one another is evident from a moment's thought. Just as we depend on others, so others depend on us. We are called by God to care for his creation in joyful service, unlocking its many secrets.

Through fulfilling this task in community with others, with the various gifts given to us by God, we can serve Him by serving one another. By this means we can serve and be served. Caring for neighbours is not a voluntary matter, but a responsible obligation. As such it affords a joyful opportunity as image-bearers of God, as stewards of creation, to share and work together with all people.

Through sin, failure and idolatry of all kinds, the human community has failed to fulfill the commandment of the Lord to love Him, and to love and serve one another. There is a lack of co-operation; we do not seek for liberty and justice for all; and our dominion of the creation is corrupted into exploitation rather than responsible stewardship. But God has not abandoned us. Through the gospel of the grace of God in Jesus Christ, we are continually offered an opportunity to repent, and to find forgiveness, new hope and a new life. Through this grace we can in faith renew our task of carrying out the mandate God has given us (Genesis 1:26-28).

This mandate that God has entrusted to us, to care for the earth and to develop its resources in accordance with God's directives, involves responsible stewardship in community with others. All of us are responsible to God and our neighbours for the lives we lead. None of us can with impunity neglect our responsibilities. To do so involves not only disobedience to God's command to love one another but also causes distress to others.

We are all called to care for our neighbours, not passing by any in need, and called to build one another up in each area of our lives. We exercise this responsibility of ours in many ways, and in particular forms in the different aspects of our lives - personal, communal and corporate, in regard to our marriages, families, schools, churches, unions, associations and governments. To give some insight into the political dimensions of this mandate for stewardship and responsibility for others, we will take a brief look at the biblical background in relation to the political task. {2}

TASK AND AUTHORITY

The Word of the Covenant in the O.T. has special provisions for the various distinct spheres of society. Human society, once it has developed beyond the tribal, patriarchal situation, is not to be organised in a single monolithic organisation. It is to be organised in a variety of ways with a variety of organisations or structures. Marriage, family, state, economic life, church life are all organised forms of human society that are referred to in the Scriptures.

Each form of society: family, state, church, economic life, etc. - has a distinct character and place within human society and, as such is addressed by the Covenant Word of the Lord, according to the **task** that is to be performed and the authority that is given to perform that task. Each of these social forms organises a particular kind of human relationships, a particular way in which people relate people. Although they are closely intertwined, the relationship of marriage is a different kind of relationship from that of the family. In marriage there is a sexual relationship of love and pledged faithfulness between man and woman as husband and wife. In the family, there is a kinship relation of loving nurture between parents and children. In the State we find yet another kind of human relationship between those who govern and those who are governed, based on the enforcing of justice between men. Within economic life we find a relationship between employers and employees, or masters and slaves, for the purpose of developing the earth's resources.

Although the precise form of these organisations may change, the Scriptures set forward a view of human society in which there are a variety of different kinds of organisations, each with an authority relationship that is answerable to God alone. The laws for each section of society are set out in different sections of the Pentateuch. The Civil Code, administered by judges, officers and kings, presented the requirement that they fulfill their tasks with respect to the law fairly and without favouritism.
(Deuteronomy 16:18-20)

To appreciate the incisive character of this instruction concerning judges, it should be seen against the background of the culture and society of the ancient Near East. In that society the king was seen as a divine or semi-divine figure, set apart from ordinary mortals; privileged, feared and obeyed. As such he was richly endowed with possessions and power.

RULERS IN ISRAEL

Given this situation, the instructions given to the rulers of Israel stand in stark contrast. The emphasis is on the fact that such leaders - whether judges or kings - are but human servants of the Lord like everyone else, but called to administer justice between one man and his neighbour, repudiating bribery, corruption and false dealing. The king was not to develop military power, or marry many wives, as was the custom of royalty of that time, nor to amass wealth. Rather he was to consider the law of the Lord and thus learn to fear the Lord by obeying all the words of the law. Only thus could he remain a faithful servant of the Lord, doing justice to his brethren (Deut 17:14-20).

THE FAMILY

There is a distinct sphere of life in which the Lord has given authority to the family so it may fulfill its specific tasks. It is evident respect to the stewardship of property, as well as educational matters. Moreover the education that was to be carried out in the family was not of a formal, abstract kind; it was an education that was caught up in the ongoing realities of life. This is apparent in the way parents had the calling to reflect upon the Ten Commandments and illustrate them by life and word to their children. Such nurturing of children involved a living of life fully before the face of the Lord, delighting in His every Word.

It is also apparent that the Passover meal was to be celebrated not by the priests but by families or households (Exodus 12:2-4). This all-important event in the history

of the Israelite people was to be part of the yearly life of every Israelite family and it had among others, an educational purpose - to teach the children of the Covenant something of the mighty acts of God, of his mercy and judgement, and so to encourage them to walk in His ways before His face.

In all these educational, welfare and economic matters the family as an extended household was a form of society that had a God-given integrity as an authority structure which called the parents and children to fulfill their respective callings in obedient ways before the face of the Lord.

THE PRIESTHOOD

The priesthood also had its various responsibilities to carry out. Leviticus 4:2-3; 13-14; 22-23; 27-28. The provisions for the sacrifice and the Tabernacle are given in Exodus 25-31 and in Leviticus 1-9, 16. In addition their task involved such matters as health, cleanliness and the providing of a haven of refuge for the man fleeing from those who would kill him to avenge a death before he had a fair trial.

The varied nature of their task, however, centrally involved the teaching, keeping and studying of the statutes and ordinances of the Lord, and the celebration of sacrifices for sin. With regard to the latter, it is of some interest to note the breadth of life's issues with which this was concerned. Sin was not restricted to merely **personal** matters; the Word of God speaks normatively to all of the various structures of human society. It is therefore of some significance to note that the priest and ruler are singled out for special mention in regard to the kind of sacrifices that are to be made when they fail to keep that Word (Leviticus 4:2-3, 22-23). It is also of significance to note that the sacrifice for sin was not something limited to the individual. Express provision is made for the sin of the whole people.

Central to the whole question of sacrifice within the life of the people of Israel was its intimate tie-up with the whole communal way of life that threaded its way through the diverse forms of society. The bond of this communal way of life was the Covenant Word of the Lord with all its provisions, and failure to keep this covenant, whether in personal, political, family or cultic affairs was the reason for the functioning of the sacrificial system within the cultic sphere of life. Sin broke the covenant sin alienated men from God sin needs atonement.

The people of God in the Old Testament were far from remaining faithful to their calling. Time and again their hearts hardened against the Lord Yahweh, and they neither delighted in His Word nor lived in obedience to it. The lack of obedience to the Word of the Lord in various spheres of social life led to different kinds of corruption. In the place of marriage fidelity there arose sexual promiscuity; instead of devotion to justice there arose bribery and corruption; instead of caring for widows and orphans, they were left to fend for themselves; those with economic power sought to use it to exploit and disadvantage the poor; instead of maintaining a worship that was pure and holy to the Lord, it became mixed with pagan rites associated with the nature religions of the people round about.

THE PROPHETS

Yet the form of the worship of the Lord in the sanctuary continued, with the priests continuing to exercise their priestly function. Central to the prophet's task in such situations was the proclamation of the Word of the Lord in a way that exposes the manner in which the pattern of life developed by the covenant people had departed

from the Word of the Covenant and was incurring God's judgement. In this sense the prophetic ministry involved a **forth-telling** of the word of the Lord. In addition, the prophets looked forward **foretelling** the day in which the Lord would establish His Kingdom of righteousness.

As the Word of the Covenant had all-of-life dimensions, so the ministry of the prophets had all-of-life dimensions, dealing with all manner of malpractices on the part of the social and cultural life of the people - social, economic, political, liturgical and moral - proclaiming the Word of the Lord amongst the affairs of men. In this respect it is of some significance to notice that on certain occasions the prophets denounced the worship life of the People because it was totally unrelated to the realities of the social and political life they were living in the marketplace. Thus in the books of Isaiah and Amos we read their denunciations of this empty piety. The task of the prophet, then, was to proclaim the Word of the Lord by giving insight into the way the existing condition of social and cultural life developed by the people stood in the light of the Word of God.

JUSTICE FOR THE OPPRESSED

In the Covenant Word provisions were made for dealing with the problems of the poor, the widow, the orphan and the other disadvantaged people in the land. Not only the Israelite people were included in the calling for a just society. Provisions were also made for treating non-Israelites, those who did not belong to the people of God, with hospitality and justice. Exodus 22:21, Leviticus 19:33-34, Deuteronomy 27:19. There was also the call for justice and liberty in all aspects of politics, including political economy. (Exodus 22:22-24; Leviticus 25:1-24; Deuteronomy 15:1-11, 19:1-10, 24:19-22) As we consider these instructions, we find that the problem of poverty was not dealt with in Israel by personal charity or by welfare organisations. If the people of Israel followed the Word of the Lord in their societal organisation, then poverty would be eliminated from their society. Failure to rightly order their society by the Word of the Lord would be detrimental to rational prosperity regardless of how diligent individuals might be in maintaining their personal ethical standards. God does take account of the sinfulness of men. Israel would not be faithful to the extent needed to eradicate poverty. Thus there is express provision made in the Mosaic law for personal generosity in dealing with the poor. But the Word of the Lord is directed to the organisation of the national economy in a way that will enable the poor to escape from their poverty.

The specific proposal for dealing with poverty included a prohibition on charging of interest on loans, to the poor, the cancellation of debts every seven years, a harvest tax to provide for the needs of the poor - a measure which required the poor to work, and the compulsory redistribution of the productive resources of the land every fifty years to prevent, a monopolistic control of productive resources developing, so as to ensure equitable access to them by all. There was to be no build-up of economic power on the part of the priesthood or civil authority (whether elders or king). Within the context of an agricultural economy, land is the basic unit of economic value. In Israel land was owned by families, but the emphasis in the covenant was that such ownership was merely a form of **stewardship** of the land. It **belonged** to the Lord, and was to be cultivated and cared for by man. Such provisions were made to prevent the evils of great divisions between rich and poor that were characteristic of feudal societies.

THE WORD OF THE COVENANT

It should be clear from the above considerations that the people of God in the Old Testament were called to worship the Lord in all the dimensions of their lives. In this connection the Word of the Covenant had social provisions for the distinct forms of social organisation: priesthood, civil authority, parents and prophets. Moreover, it is quite clear from the Scriptures that God-given authority to exercise the tasks involved in these various spheres of society have defined limits upon its legitimate exercise of power. (Consider the following passages, for example: Deuteronomy 21:13-21, 2 Chronicles 26:16-21) Thus Israel was one people, bound together by blood ties and more importantly by the Covenant Word of the Lord, which bound the people into a community with a distinctive outlook on life. This same covenant had special provisions for the differentiated forms of human society and the different God-given authorities that this involved.

When God gave directions to the Israelites at Sinai for their national life, He made it clear that, in the family, parents have authority over their children (Exodus 20:12, Leviticus 19:3). At the same time He made it clear that parents do not have unlimited authority over children; they cannot do whatever they like with their children. In certain matters the parents lack competence to deal with their children and must look to another societal organisation to do what is needed. Only the civil authorities, for example have the power of life and death (Deuteronomy 21:18-21).

UZZIAH - AUTHORITY ASTRAY

Uzziah was one of the more godly and successful kings of Judah. However, the power that he gained through success led him to a serious act of unfaithfulness to God, which resulted in Uzziah being condemned to be a leper, and therefore a social outcast for the rest of his life. The unfaithfulness of Uzziah was not one of renouncing his faith or adopting some pagan practise. What he did, was to assume that his authority as king, the ruler of the State, gave him a competence to take over the functions of the priesthood; he assumed that, as head of the State, he had supreme power over the whole society and each one of its organisations. He could see no limit to the legitimate exercise of his power. By condemning him to be a leper for the rest of his days, God revealed, not only to Uzziah and his people, but to all peoples of all times, how fatally wrong he was (2 Chronicles 26:16-21).

THE NEW COVENANT

Under the new Covenant the people of God is not a **national** community as it was under the Old Covenant. It is an **ecumenical** community penetrating the nations of the world. As such there are obligations to respect societal authority. Romans 13, Matthew 28:18-20. The legal system that was to Israel at the birth of her nationhood can hardly be adopted as the law for our industrialized, technical and culturally and religiously pluralistic society. Nor can we follow the specific requirements of the year of Jubilee as a means of maintaining an equitable sharing and responsible freedom with regard to economic activity. However these features of Israel's legal system as well as many others, are an important part of the specific requirements of the Word of God as it applies to man's economic and political life. In the light of the Word, man's task continues to be one of the giving positive form to God's world as a part of the divine calling to serve the God in caring for and forming God's creation. This task includes forming just laws and social structures in response to the Word of God, and all our laws stand under the judgement of that Word. Only the Word of God is above criticism, our human legal, social and economic responses to the calling of that Word must always be seen as fallible human responses. If we have the eyes to see and ears to hear, the Scriptures set forth a view of human society that is both just and truly

liberating for all.

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