

ECONOMIC JUSTICE TODAY: JUBILEE IN A MERITOCRACY

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For the young Israelite nation, the year of jubilee was intended to be a year of hope and new beginnings, a time for families to experience renewed self-sufficiency and freedom. Although the form of the jubilee was altered in the early church, its powerful principles persisted. Given society's current level of economic disparity, the jubilee is needed today more than ever. This paper will consider the role of education in experiencing jubilee in modern meritocracies.

Biblical and Historical Description of the Jubilee

At the formation of the Hebrew nation, jubilee was inaugurated as an institution that would provide periodic economic freedom. This freedom would take two forms—(a) the release of people who had sold themselves into slavery and (b) the returning of land to families who had been forced by financial hardship to sell their property.

This double release was part of a larger system of economic justice. The jubilee was supposed to take place every 49 years, after the seventh occurrence of the seven year sabbath cycle. These shorter cycles of rest were to be observed by leaving farmland fallow, canceling outstanding debts to fellow Israelites, and releasing financially indebted Israelite slaves (Lev. 25:8; Deut. 15:1-3, 12-15). The jubilee would begin on the Day of Atonement, when the Israelites were commanded to “have the trumpet sounded throughout all your land” (Lev. 25:9).¹ In this fiftieth year, they were to “proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you: you shall return, every one of you, to your property and every one of you to your family” (Lev. 25:10).

¹ Harold W. Attridge and Society of Biblical Literature, *HarperCollins Study Bible - Student Edition: Fully Revised & Updated*, Rev Upd. (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 2006).

The value God placed on a family's ability to provide for the needs of its members is seen in the jubilee teachings. First, given the social context, God allowed that people experiencing financial troubles could sell themselves to work for other more financially secure Israelites. In this way families would not starve since they would receive life's necessities from the family that was economically better off in exchange for their labor. The treatment of these dependents was not to be as slaves. "If any who are dependent on you become so impoverished that they sell themselves to you, you shall not make them serve as slaves.... You shall not rule over them with harshness" (Lev. 25:39, 43a).

Second, this economic relationship would end after it had served its purpose. Although this arrangement was designed to sustain a struggling family during a difficult time, it would become oppressive if allowed to continue indefinitely, with one family living in servitude to another generation after generation. Therefore, it was determined that the family would be freed and allowed to return to their land in the year of the jubilee. "Then they and their children with them shall be free from your authority; they shall go back to their own family and return to their ancestral property" (Lev. 25:41).

This freedom was a second chance to get back on their feet and to meet their own needs and desires. This ensured that "each person or family had at least a once-in-a-lifetime chance to start afresh, no matter how irresponsibly they had handled their finances or how far into debt they had fallen."²

In order for this release to be effective, the family required land to which they could return. This ancestral land would have originally been sold in order to pay the family's debts as financial difficulties increased. Another relative had the right to redeem, or buy back, the land

² Craig L. Blomberg, *Neither Poverty nor Riches: A Biblical Theology of Possessions*, New Studies in Biblical Theology 7 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 45.

from the purchaser in order to keep the land within the broader family (Lev. 25:25-28). However, if no one could or would do this for the struggling family, the land would then have belonged to the non-kin purchaser. In the year of the jubilee, this land would be given back to the original owner.

The rationale given for this level of adjustment of property rights every fifty years is tied to the nature of land ownership. God does not view the various land users as absolute owners. Rather, God is the true owner, and therefore has the right to determine how, when and by whom it is used. “The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants” (Lev. 25:23). God, as true and ultimate owner of the land, had the authority to interrupt the normal flow of business and declare that poor people still had a right to live on their land. This combines the two strands of thought regarding possessions in the Torah. “On the one hand, the ownership of property enshrines a fundamental Judeo-Christian value. On the other hand, numerous safeguards relativize turning the ownership of property into an absolute value or into an excuse for selfishness.”³

Other provisions are described that cover rest for the land and also exceptions to the two-part description above. For example, in Leviticus 25 procedures are described that affect Levites, resident aliens, and property in walled cities as compared to farmland outside the city. Additionally, Leviticus 27 gives instructions regarding the redemption of land dedicated to God, and Numbers 36 speaks to the issue of keeping land in the family that is owned by women. While each of these exceptions speaks to important parts of Jewish culture, the fundamental system described above represents the main body of thought and regulation regarding the year of jubilee.

³ *ibid.*, 39.

“Although scholars are disagreed about whether it was ever observed,” the biblical narrative does demonstrate the value that God placed on keeping the covenant and releasing Israelite slaves.⁴ When Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, attacked Jerusalem, King Zedekiah made a covenant with everyone in the city to free their Hebrew slaves (Jer. 34:8-10). Consequently, God instructed Jeremiah to tell King Zedekiah that Jerusalem would indeed fall to Babylon, but that Zedekiah would not be killed. However, when the Hebrew slave-owners changed their minds and refused to set the slaves free, God responded with extreme displeasure, saying:

I myself made a covenant with your ancestors when I brought them out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, saying, “Every seventh year each of you must set free any Hebrews who have been sold to you and have served you six years; you must set them free from your service.” But your ancestors did not listen to me or incline their ears to me. You yourselves recently repented and did what was right in my sight by proclaiming liberty to one another, and you made a covenant before me...but then you turned around and profaned my name when each of you took back your male and female slaves.... You have not obeyed me by granting a release to your neighbors and friends; I am going to grant a release to you, says the Lord—a release to the sword, to pestilence, and to famine” (Jer. 34:13-17).

Jubilee: Social & Theological Reflections

Jeremiah’s prophetic work in Jerusalem demonstrates the level of importance the seven-year cycle of debt forgiveness and freedom was to God—unfaithfulness led to the death of the

⁴ Bruce V. Malchow, *Social Justice in the Hebrew Bible* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996), 26. See also *Neither Poverty nor Riches* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999), 44-45.

king and thousands of other residents of the city. Consequently, we can be sure that the principles underlying these culturally relevant social and economic laws were of enduring value, even if they were ignored by society. Our attention will now turn from the biblical account to a consideration of the values intrinsic to the preceding laws and experiences.

The returning of land to the original family every fifty years would have significant economic impact of equalizing wealth and opportunity. Productive capital would move from the well-to-do back to those who had experienced a difficult economic hardship up to a half-century earlier. “Such a practice would have provided equity since the poor would have gained property and freedom from service without price, at the expense of the rich.”⁵ Ron Sider also highlights the equalizing effect of this guidance: “Physical handicaps, death of a breadwinner, or lack of natural ability may lead some families to become poorer than others. But God does not want such disadvantages to lead to ever-increasing extremes of wealth and poverty with the result that the poor eventually lack the basic resources to earn a decent livelihood.”⁶ Echoing this sentiment of avoiding significant disparity, Ellen White, an early Seventh-day Adventist pioneer writing in the last 1800s stated that because of the jubilee, “every family was secured in its possession, and a safeguard was afforded against the extremes of either wealth or want.”⁷

The economic role that land ownership played in society at the time the jubilee law was written reveals the priorities of God, or God’s ethical value system. “In an agricultural society, land is capital, so land was the basic means of producing wealth in Israel.”⁸ John Howard Yoder explains, “Before the invention of the machine, the only wealth of a people was constituted by

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ronald J. Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger: Moving from Affluence to Generosity*, 5th ed. (Nashville, TN: W Publishing Group, 1997), 67.

⁷ Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1905), 185.

⁸ Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, 68.

the soil and the flocks. That is what today would be called capital.”⁹ The jubilee therefore meant that this wealth production ability “was to be equalized—up to the point of every family having the resources to earn a decent living.”¹⁰ This does not necessary mean

that every family had exactly the same income. It does mean, however, that every family had an equality of economic opportunity up to the point that they had the resources to earn a living that would enable them not only to meet minimal needs of food, clothing, and housing but also to be respected participants in the community. Possessing their own land enabled each extended family to acquire the necessities for a decent life through responsible work.¹¹

Ellen White described the moral and social significance of the jubilee for those who temporary held land purchased from other families:

The Lord would place a check upon the inordinate love of property and power. Great evils would result from the continued accumulation of wealth by one class, and the poverty and degradation of another. Without some restraint the power of the wealthy would become a monopoly, and the poor, though in every respect fully as worthy in God's sight, would be regarded and treated as inferior to their more prosperous brethren.... The regulations that God established were designed to promote social equality. The provisions of the sabbatical year and the jubilee would, in a great measure, set right that which during the interval had gone wrong in the social and political economy of the nation.¹²

⁹ John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 69.

¹⁰ Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, 68.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 67.

¹² Ellen G. White, *The Story of Patriarchs and Prophets* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1958), 534.

White goes on to describe the benefits inherent in the jubilee instructions in relation to our characters and our interconnectedness, a social reality that takes on even great significance in the context of twenty-first century globalization.

These regulations were designed to bless the rich no less than the poor. They would restrain avarice and a disposition for self-exaltation, and would cultivate a noble spirit of benevolence; and by fostering good will and confidence between all classes, they would promote social order, the stability of government. We are all woven together in the great web of humanity, and whatever we can do to benefit and uplift others will reflect in blessing upon ourselves. The law of mutual dependence runs through all classes of society. The poor are not more dependent upon the rich than are the rich upon the poor. While the one class ask a share in the blessings which God has bestowed upon their wealthier neighbors, the other need the faithful service, the strength of brain and bone and muscle, that are the capital of the poor.¹³

Finally, it should be acknowledged that returning land to the original family was not considered an act of charity; it was the law, a civil and economic “institutionalized structure.”¹⁴ Those who had been forced to sell their land had a right to have it returned. This is evidence of Blomberg’s assertion: “Unlike neighboring cultures, Israel’s law tended to place a higher priority on people than on property or social class.”¹⁵

As previously noted, it is not documented that Israel followed this cycle of redistribution. It is not surprising, therefore, that archaeologists have found increasing levels of economic

¹³ Ibid., 534-535.

¹⁴ Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, 69.

¹⁵ Craig L. Blomberg, *Neither Poverty nor Riches: A Biblical Theology of Possessions*, New Studies in Biblical Theology 7 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 41.

disparity over the early centuries of the new nation. At the outset, God instructed Moses that the land was to be distributed so that larger tribes received more land while smaller tribes received less (Num. 26:52-56). “Scholars generally agree that early Israel was not divided into classes and that there was considerable equality among Israelites.”¹⁶

This focus on equity would have been maintained for each family had the jubilee system been followed. Instead, wealth inequality grew significantly. “As the centuries passed, the disparity between the classes increased.... By the eighth century B.C.E., the time of the prophets Amos, Micah, and Isaiah, the gap between the classes was enormous.”¹⁷ For example, in Terzah at the time of Solomon in the tenth century, house size did not vary significantly. Two hundred years later, “some houses were mansions, and others were hovels.”¹⁸ Similar patterns have been unearthed in Shechem and Samaria. For example, in Samaria archaeologists have found “the luxurious homes of the rich, decorated with imported ivory.”¹⁹ During this period, “the loss of ancestral properties to wealthy aristocrats who bought up vast tracts of land for ever altered the economic landscape and widened the gap between rich and poor.”²⁰

Against this background, the relevance of the prophet Isaiah’s warning becomes clear. “Ah, you who join house to house, who add field to field, until there is room for no one but you, and you are left to live alone in the midst of the land! The Lord of hosts has sworn in my hearing: Surely many houses shall be desolate, large and beautiful houses, without inhabitant” (Is. 5:8-9). One example of this domination and exploitation is the story of Jezebel and Ahab’s seizure of Naboth’s family vineyard despite his protestation (1 Kings 21). This usurping of land

¹⁶ Malchow, *Social Justice in the Hebrew Bible*, 8.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Blomberg, *Neither Poverty nor Riches*, 69.

ignored the claims of the true owner of the land, which was Yahweh, not Naboth. Referring to God's ownership of the land, Ellen White writes:

The people were to be impressed with the fact that it was God's land which they were permitted to possess for a time; that He was...the original proprietor, and that He would have special consideration made for the poor and unfortunate. It was to be impressed upon the minds of all that the poor have as much right to a place in God's world as have the more wealthy.

Such were the provisions made by our merciful Creator, to lessen suffering, to bring some ray of hope, to flash some gleam of sunshine, into the life of the destitute and distressed.²¹

Jesus and the Jubilee

This biblical and historical analysis reveals God's means (i.e., periodic returning of families to their ancestral land) and ends (i.e., economic opportunity, security and equality) in the theocracy. However, the jubilee in the life and ministry of Jesus is not as direct or obvious as in Leviticus 25. To observe the significance of jubilee for Jesus, we must look more carefully at both his teachings and the community he formed.

After returning from being tempted in the wilderness, the Gospel of Luke presents Jesus' visit to the synagogue in his home town as the location for his inaugural speech. To frame his ministry, Jesus read from Isaiah, and then applied the prophecy to himself.

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”

²¹ White, *The Story of Patriarchs and Prophets*, 534.

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down.

The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:18-21).

From the outset, Jesus declared that his mission had deep economic significance. “The gospel of Jesus inaugurates the year of the Lord’s favor, that is, Jubilee (Luke 4:19).”²² By quoting Isaiah 61:1-2 and claiming its fulfillment in him, Jesus announced that his purpose went beyond teaching abstract theological truths or rectifying cultic rituals. A slight alteration of the original scripture to include wording from another passage urges readers to consider Jesus’ message as being material and not only spiritual. When Jesus recites Isaiah 61:1-2, “a phrase from these verses, namely, ‘brokenhearted’ is omitted. In its place are words from Isaiah 58:6, ‘sets at liberty the oppressed.’ By this substitution, it seems, emphasis is being given to the physical, material aspect of Jesus’ ministry.”²³ This change would keep us from the temptation to “spiritualize or psychologize his ministry.”²⁴

Applying Isaiah 61 to himself represents “a visible socio-political, economic restructuring of relations among the people of God, achieved by divine intervention in the person of Jesus as the one Anointed and endued with the Spirit.”²⁵ The “year of the Lord’s favor” highlighted the very essence of the jubilee—setting the captives free was truly *good news* to those for whom jubilee meant freedom. Jesus’ self-reference indicates that “the liberation

²² Willard M. Swartley, *Covenant of Peace: The Missing Peace in New Testament Theology and Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 21.

²³ Perry B. Yoder, *Shalom: The Bible’s Word for Salvation, Justice, and Peace* (Nappanee, IN: Evangel Publishing, 1987), 122.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 32.

promised by the Jubilee can ultimately be achieved only by those who attach themselves to him.”²⁶

The connection between Jesus’ ministry and the jubilee can be seen in multiple ways. John Howard Yoder addresses this question by examining the Gospels in light of four characteristics of the jubilee and the sabbatical year. First, the land was to remain fallow or unplowed and planted. There is evidence that this stipulation had been followed as part of the seven-year cycle even though the fifty year jubilee had been neglected. Jesus’ silence on this aspect “is not at all surprising because...only this one had become common usage.”²⁷

The second and third topics—remission of debts and liberation of slaves—as evidenced in the Luke 4 passage just discussed, are “at the center of [Jesus’] theology.”²⁸ Regarding debts, Yoder points out that in the Lord’s Prayer, we are taught to forgive or remit our debts (Matt. 6:12). The word here translated debt is *opheilema*, which in “the Greek text signifies precisely a monetary debt, in the most material sense of the term.”²⁹ Therefore, Jesus’ prayer “is not simply recommending vaguely that we might pardon those who have bothered us or made us trouble, but tells us purely and simply to erase the debts of those who owe us money; that is to say, practice the jubilee.”³⁰ To clarify, Yoder describes the “Our Father” to mean “the time has come for the faithful people to abolish all the debts which bind the poor ones of Israel, for your debts toward God are also wiped away (for that is the gospel, the good news).”³¹ This is not the only place Jesus teaches to forgive debts and thereby release those who are captive to and oppressed

²⁶ Blomberg, *Neither Poverty nor Riches*, 134.

²⁷ John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 60.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 61.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 62.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

by the financial burden, but it is sufficient to indicate the importance of these themes in the teachings of Jesus.³²

Fourth, the redistribution of capital was often taught by Jesus. For example, Jesus comforts his followers by revealing that God is giving them his kingdom. Then he bids them, “Sell your possessions, and give alms” (Luke 12:32). He asks the same of the Rich Young Ruler (Mark 10:17-27), and in the story of the rich man and Lazarus, the wealthy individual finds himself in hell simply because he did not redistribute his wealth to Lazarus, the poor beggar (Luke 16:19-31). In the story of Zacchaeus, salvation comes when he not only returns four times the amount received through cheating but also as he gives half of his possessions to the poor (Luke 19:8-9).

In addition to the four characteristics described by Yoder, Willard Swartley goes further and draws more deeply from Luke to support Jesus’ emphasis on jubilee principles. The following “five points, taken together, constitute a fuller portrait of the Jubilee mission of the servant Messiah”³³:

1. Luke’s recurring statements of blessings to the poor and stern warnings toward the rich.
2. Luke’s frequent emphasis upon the important role of women in the Gospel drama.
3. Luke’s strong emphasis upon Jesus’ acceptance of sinners, outcasts, and outsiders.
4. Luke’s clear intent...to highlight the ministry of Jesus as “gospelizing,” a literal translation of *euangelisasthai*.
5. Luke strongly emphasizes the gospel’s *release* of people from Satan’s power.³⁴

³² For other biblical material, see the parable of the unforgiving servant in Matt. 18 and the dishonest manager in Luke 16.

³³ Swartley, *Covenant of Peace*, 139.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 137-138.

Beyond the teachings of Jesus, we can also see jubilee principles put on display by the community he formed. Although the kingdom of Jesus “disappointed popular Jewish expectations,”³⁵ it was consistent with the spirit of the Messiah described in Isaiah 11:4—“With righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth.” This kingdom can be at least glimpsed in the generous sharing of finances in the early movement. For example, Ron Sider points out that it appears that the disciples pooled money to help the poor (John 13:29), and women financially supported the fledgling community (Luke 8:1-3; Mark 15:40-41). Avoiding the need for a theocracy or bureaucracy to enforce a society-wide jubilee, the community could live the ancient principles by taking care of those in need. An additional example of this community is described by Sider. “When Jesus asked the rich young man to sell his goods and give to the poor, he did not say, ‘Become destitute and friendless.’ Rather, he said, ‘Come follow me’ (Matt. 19:21). In other words, he invited him to join a community of sharing and love.”³⁶

Craig Blomberg speaks to this new social ordering. In Jesus, “God’s dynamic reign has broken into human history,” and “God intends to create a new community of his people who model, at least in part in the present, what God intends for all humanity and what he will one day perfectly create.”³⁷ To summarize, “In the community of the redeemed, all relationships are being transformed. Jesus and his first followers vividly demonstrated that the old covenant’s pattern of economic relationships among God’s people is not only to be continued but also deepened”³⁸

The Early Church as a Jubilee Community

³⁵ Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, 75.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 75-76.

³⁷ Blomberg, *Neither Poverty nor Riches*, 113.

³⁸ Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, 76.

In the book of Acts, we are able to see the development of the jubilee community that had begun in Jesus. Care must be taken as we attempt to extrapolate ethical principles and methods of implementation from one historical period to another; in this case from the writing of Leviticus to the life of Jesus and then into the early church. “No command issued to Old Testament followers of Yahweh necessarily carries over into the Christian era unchanged, but every command reflects principles at some level that are binding on Christians (2 Tim. 3:16).”³⁹ More specifically to our present concern, “While not applicable in all its details to Christians in the New Testament age, New Testament allusions to the Jubilee...demonstrate that certain principles underlying this legislation still remain in force.”⁴⁰

The early church continued the pattern modeled by Jesus and the community of his followers—voluntary association characterized by mutual aid. In addition to spending time together in the temple, eating together, and praising God together, they “had all things in common” (Acts 2:44b). Furthermore, “they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need” (Act 2:45). This communal approach to finances is emphasized. “Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything was held in common.... There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need” (Acts 4:32-35).

However, this should not be read as saying that *everyone* sold *everything* and distributed it to ensure *exact equity*. Rather, they had an attitude that their possessions belonged to the community, and they expressed this attitude through tangible care whenever someone was in

³⁹ Blomberg, *Neither Poverty nor Riches*, 39.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 45.

need. A grammatical consideration of the passage in Acts 2 supports this reading. “Verses 43-47 are dominated by highly marked imperfect tense verbs, whereas one normally expects aorists in historical narrative. There is no once-for-all divestiture of property in view here, but periodic acts of charity as needs arose.”⁴¹ Other stories recorded in Acts support this interpretation by revealing that homes were still owned (e.g., eating in homes in 2:46b; Peter praying on the roof in 10:9; Peter escaping to Mary’s house in 12:12). It can therefore be concluded that excess possessions of the well-to-do were sold off to care for those in need.

This radical notion of communal care was a voluntary expression of the kingdom. The voluntary nature of selling property to support the community is emphasized in Peter’s rebuke of Ananias who sold land and retained a portion of the proceeds while claiming to be giving all to the movement. Peter asked Ananias, “While [the property] remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, were not the proceeds at your disposal? How is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You did not lie to us but to God!” (Luke 5:4).

The development of the early church as revealed throughout the book of Acts and the other New Testament writers becomes more complex but remains committed to jubilee values (e.g., Acts 6:1-7; 1 Cor. 11:20-22; 2 Cor. 8:13-14; Gal. 2:10):

A middle class and even an upper class in Christianity developed...as the gospel spread into more well-to-do Greco-Roman circles, although those classes still remained a minority in the church. But concern for the poor...recurs throughout Acts, as Christians are committed to reducing the gap between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have-nots’ in their congregations.⁴²

⁴¹ Ibid., 162.

⁴² Ibid., 174. For more on the early church and subsequent developments, see Ron Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, 77-87, Justo L. Gonzalez, *Faith and Wealth: A History of Early Christian Ideas on the Origin, Significance, and Use of Money* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1990), Redmond Mullin, *The Wealth of Christians: A Study of*

From this overview of Jesus and the early church, a number of differences and innovations can be cited. First, there is a shift in the context from a local theocracy to a global movement disconnected from any specific political arrangement. Second, the mandatory jubilee (which appears to have been generally ignored anyway) gives way to voluntary actions toward equality at the personal level. Third, mandatory land *ownership* is replaced with the *sale* of land in order to achieve the desired economic equality and the meeting of needs. That is, different means are used to reach the same ends. Fourth, the redistribution moves from a national scale to the scope of the religious community. Despite these significant changes, the value system behind the actions remains the same—“God’s deep, abiding concern for justice and equity.”⁴³

Lastly, given our 21st century social location, we may briefly bring this ancient communal practice into conversation with Marxist social theory. In contrast to the nature of free participation described in Acts, Marx “attempted to create by legislation, by a totalitarian regime, and by a crusade against religion, what arguably could have been accomplished only in a voluntary religious community such as is described in the book of Acts. What is more, it is only consumption and not also production that is shared in Acts’ model.”⁴⁴

21st Century Application: Jubilee Principles in a Meritocracy

Even a cursory study of current economic indicators reveals that the gap between rich and poor has not dissipated in the 2,000 years since the jubilee community formed around Jesus. The increasing inequality is no longer a concern for Christians alone, evidenced by the number of

how Christians have Dealt with the Question of Riches through History—with Implications and Applications for Our Own Times (New York: Mary Knoll, 1984), Prentiss L. Pemberton and Daniel Rush Finn, *Toward a Christian Economic Ethic: Stewardship and Social Power* (Minneapolis, MN: Winston Press 1985).

⁴³ Richard J. Foster, *Freedom of Simplicity: Finding Harmony in a Complex World*, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2005), 26.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 162.

economists and sociologists now engaging the issue.⁴⁵ In January 2011, *The Economist* reported that the top “0.5% of the world’s adult population” controls “\$69.2 trillion in assets, more than a third of the global total.”⁴⁶ Looking at changes in incomes in the United States reveals a widening gap: “[I]n 1987 the top 1% of taxpayers received 12.3% of all pre-tax income. Twenty years later their share, at 23.5%, was nearly twice as large. The bottom half’s share fell from 15.6% to 12.2% over the same period.”⁴⁷

This growing disparity is a social scourge that could be avoided if people were to accept God’s ancient wisdom. Ellen White wrote:

The principles which God has enjoined, would prevent the terrible evils that in all ages have resulted from the oppression of the rich toward the poor and the suspicion and hatred of the poor toward the rich. While they might hinder the amassing of great wealth and the indulgence of unbounded luxury, they would prevent the consequent ignorance and degradation of tens of thousands whose ill-paid servitude is required to build up these colossal fortunes. They would bring a peaceful solution of those problems that now threaten to fill the world with anarchy and bloodshed.⁴⁸

White also describes the cities in which disparity is most clearly seen. If her description were true in the eighteen hundreds, how much more true it is today.

In the great cities there are multitudes living in poverty and wretchedness, well-nigh destitute of food, shelter, and clothing; while in the same cities are those who

⁴⁵ See *The Spirit Level: Why Equality Is Better For Everyone* (Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, 2010), *Injustice: Why Social Inequality Persists* (Daniel Dorling, 2010), and “Decomposing the Education Wage Gap” (Julie L. Hotchkiss and Membere Shifera, *Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta Working Papers*, Aug. 2010).

⁴⁶ “More Millionaires than Australians,” *The Economist*, January 22, 2011.

⁴⁷ “The Rise and Rise of the Cognitive Elite,” *The Economist*, January 22, 2011.

⁴⁸ White, *The Story of Patriarchs and Prophets*, 536.

have more than heart could wish, who live luxuriously, spending their money on richly furnished houses, on personal adornment, or worse still, upon the gratification of sensual appetites, upon liquor, tobacco, and other things that destroy the powers of the brain, unbalance the mind, and debase the soul. The cries of starving humanity are coming up before God, while by every species of oppression and extortion men are piling up colossal fortunes.⁴⁹

Having established, firstly, that Jesus intended the principles of jubilee to be embodied by his community beyond the time of his resurrection and that, secondly, the world, despite its acquisition of scientific *information*, has gained little *wisdom* regarding economic justice over the past two thousand, the followers of Jesus today must ask the difficult question, “How can we be faithful to our economic heritage in our age and in our social context?” That is, given the enduring nature of God’s values, we must take the biblical teachings on economics “seriously and look for applications even in the changed cultures of modern society that permit those principles to be implemented.”⁵⁰ “The various particulars will change from situation to situation, but generous giving rather than selfish hoarding, accompanied by compassionate commitment to doing what will most help the genuinely needy, must remain a priority for God’s people.”⁵¹

To be faithful to our Christian heritage then, we must consider what would be the greatest aid to those in need today given our present social, political, economic and religious location. In addition to immediate assistance to those in poverty and a return to more communal, supportive relationships within the church, the factors contributing to long-term self-sustainability in our culture—like returning to one’s ancestral land in biblical times—should be sought out.

⁴⁹ Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 9 (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1948), 12.

⁵⁰ Blomberg, *Neither Poverty nor Riches*, 85.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 175.

In the 1800s Ellen White still encouraged people to move from cities back to the land. “In God's plan for Israel every family had a home on the land, with sufficient ground for tilling. Thus were provided both the means and the incentive for a useful, industrious, and self-supporting life. And no devising of men has ever improved upon that plan. To the world's departure from it is owing, to a large degree, the poverty and wretchedness that exist today.”⁵² “If the poor now crowded into the cities could find homes upon the land, they might not only earn a livelihood, but find health and happiness now unknown to them.”⁵³ “If they ever become industrious and self-supporting, very many must have assistance, encouragement, and instruction. There are multitudes of poor families for whom no better missionary work could be done than to assist them in settling on the land and in learning how to make it yield them a livelihood”⁵⁴

However, today, in an era of industrial farming and urbanization, it is doubtful that this approach to building a “self-supporting life” would be possible for the millions, not thousands, of people living in cities. Instead, I assert that education is the most important productive resource today, much as land was in the time of the writing of Leviticus or even in the 19th century. Michael Young quotes Daniel Bell to establish our economic location: “The post-industrial society, in its logic, is a meritocracy. Differential status and differential income are based on technical skills and higher education.”⁵⁵ In our knowledge economy,⁵⁶ education rather than land or machines is the most fundamental asset or productive capital used by workers to exchange for the wages that sustain them and their families.

⁵² White, *The Ministry of Healing*, 183-184.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 190-191.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 192.

⁵⁵ Michael Young, *The Rise of the Meritocracy*, 2nd ed. (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1994), xiv-xv.

⁵⁶ Michael A. Peters, “Three Forms of the Knowledge Economy: Learning, Creativity and Openness.,” *British Journal of Educational Studies* 58, no. 1 (March 2010): 67.

All kinds of talent are rewarded. But the number of people who get rich by singing or kicking a ball is tiny compared with the number who become wealthy or influential through brainpower. The most lucrative careers, such as law, medicine, technology and finance, all require above-average mental skills.⁵⁷

In his 1958 book of political analysis and satire, *The Rise of the Meritocracy*, Michael Young addressed the development and limits of a meritocracy, which in its most basic form can be expressed as “I.Q. + effort = merit”.⁵⁸ I.Q. is over-simplified and could be replaced with the term *human capital*, the “acquired skills, knowledge, or experience workers possess” that can be developed “through the accumulation of education and training.”⁵⁹ Regardless of label—I.Q. or human capital—the basic concept remains. In his introduction to the second edition of his book in 1994, Young applies this formula to the acquisition of powerful positions in society:

Nepotism should go, bribery should go, inheritance should go as a means of attaining public office. They haven’t disappeared, or course, but the belief has become established that it is wrong to allow nepotism, bribery, or inheritance any sway: individual merit should be the only test that should be applied. The coming of industry and its displacement of agriculture as the foundation of the economy is what has made the difference.⁶⁰

Because “the cognitive and social skills that are gained in educational institutions are the foundation upon which people can build their future well-being,”⁶¹ it is not surprising that higher

⁵⁷ “The Rise and Rise of the Cognitive Elite.”

⁵⁸ Young, *The Rise of the Meritocracy*, xiii.

⁵⁹ Stephen J. McNamee and Robert K. Miller Jr., *The Meritocracy Myth* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), 39.

⁶⁰ Young, *The Rise of the Meritocracy*, xiii.

⁶¹ Fernando Reimers, “What Can We Learn from Studying Educational Opportunity in the Americas and Why Should We Care?,” in *Unequal Schools, Unequal Chances: The Challenges to Equal Opportunity in the Americas*, ed.

levels of education are positively associated with greater income, whether in Europe⁶² or in the United States. The Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta states that “one of the single most important determinants of earnings differences across groups of workers is their education status.”⁶³ In 2002, the U.S. Census Bureau reported on the correlation between income and education. “Average earnings ranged from \$18,900 for high school dropouts to \$25,900 for high school graduates, \$45,400 for college graduates, and \$99,300 for workers with professional degrees (M.D., J.D., D.D.S., or D.V.M.).”⁶⁴ Five years later, the Census Bureau released information stating “adults 18 and older with a master’s, professional or doctoral degree earned an average of \$79,946, while those with less than a high school diploma earned about \$19,915.”⁶⁵

This wage gap between levels of education is increasing:

[I]n 1975, full-time, year-round workers with a bachelor’s degree had 1.5 times the annual earnings of workers with only a high school diploma. By 1999, this ratio had risen to 1.8. Workers with an advanced degree, who earned 1.8 times the earnings of high school graduates in 1975, averaged 2.6 times the earnings of workers with a high school diploma in 1999. During the same period, the relative earnings of the least educated workers fell. While in 1975, full-time, year-round workers without a high school diploma earned 0.9 times the earnings of workers

Reimers, Fernando (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies, 2000), 7.

⁶² Juan Prieto-Rodriguez, Carlos Pestana Barros, and Jose A. C. Vieira, “What a Quantile Approach Can Tell Us about Returns to Education in Europe.,” *Education Economics* 16, no. 4 (December 2008): 404.

⁶³ Julie L. Hotchkiss and Menbere Shiferaw, “Decomposing the Education Wage Gap: Everything but the Kitchen Sink,” *Working Paper Series (Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta)*, no. 12 (2010): 1.

⁶⁴ Jennifer Cheeseman Day and Eric C. Newburger, *The Big Payoff: Educational Attainment and Synthetic Estimates of Work-Life Earnings* (U.S. Census Bureau, July 2002), 2, <http://www.census.gov/prod/2002pubs/p23-210.pdf>.

⁶⁵ *Earnings Gap Highlighted by Census Bureau Data on Educational Attainment* (U.S. Census Bureau, March 15, 2007), <http://www.census.gov/newsroom/releases/archives/education/cb07-40.html>.

with a high school diploma; by 1999, they were earning only 0.7 times the average earnings of high school graduates.⁶⁶

Two Christian critiques of meritocracy, though certainly not exhaustive,⁶⁷ are important at this point. First, even though meritocracies may be more just than systems of privilege based on heredity, the fact that they still lead to significant inequality is unjust when viewed with the jubilee lens. Regardless of whether someone's poverty results from the family they were born into, a lack of quality education, poor moral or financial decisions, or other mental or physical limitations, living in hunger and deprivation is still far short of God's call for the dignity of jubilee. A meritocracy may be considered to fulfill procedural justice (i.e., the system is fair, so the resulting inequality is just), but from a Christian perspective this does not constitute distributive justice.⁶⁸

Second, I contend that for a meritocracy to even meet considerations of procedural justice, it would need to ensure equal access to education and training for all of society's members, a social reality not yet achieved despite the best efforts of the public school system. True procedural justice calls for quality education to be "provided for children from disadvantaged social backgrounds so that a larger fraction of them will acquire skills required later on to compete for jobs against persons with more advantaged childhoods."⁶⁹ Current school

⁶⁶ Day and Newburger, *The Big Payoff: Educational Attainment and Synthetic Estimates of Work-Life Earnings*, 3.

⁶⁷ For additional criticisms of meritocratic theory and practice, see Stephen J. McNamee and Robert K. Miller Jr., *The Meritocracy Myth* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), Steven Fraser, ed., *The Bell Curve Wars* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1995), John Goldthorpe, "The Myth of Education-based Meritocracy," *New Economy* 10, no. 4 (December 2003), and Spyros Themelis, "Meritocracy through Education and Social Mobility in Post-war Britain: A Critical Examination," *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 29, no. 5 (September 2008). Regardless of these philosophical and sociological critiques, the relationship between educational attainment and subsequent income levels has been sufficiently documented to support the basic argument of this paper.

⁶⁸ For an analysis of procedural, distributive, commutative and retributive justice, see Ron Sider, "Justice, Human Rights, and Government" in *Toward an Evangelical Public Policy*, Ronald J. Sider and Diane Knippers, eds. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2005), 163-193.

⁶⁹ John E. Roemer, "Equality of Opportunity," in *Meritocracy and Economic Inequality*, ed. Kenneth Arrow, Samuel Bowles, and Steven Durlauf (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 17.

system structures have not been able to “level the playing field...so that all those with relevant potential will eventually be admissible to pools of candidates competing for positions.”⁷⁰ A school system that fails to achieve equitable outcomes contributes to the “creation of an undemocratic elitism.”⁷¹

Because a significant portion of funds to operate local public schools are raised through local taxes, wealthier neighborhoods are able to offer far superior education to their children than families in poorer communities. “The disparate funding for public schools...between states and within metropolitan areas has turned some public schools into meccas for affluent students and others into decaying infrastructures with overcrowded classrooms and soaring drop-out rates.”⁷² Statistical studies have been done to assess the ratio of inputs (dollars) needed to produce positive outcomes (high performing students). While the exact ratio is not relevant to the present ethical consideration, the reason this type of study is even possible is quite prescient. These studies are possible specifically because “educational financing has been so unequal across school districts in our country.”⁷³ This disparity allows for educational expenditures to be correlated with subsequent student success.

Clearly, a truly meritocratic society would provide equal educational opportunities to all of its children so that the economic gaps from one generation would not be heightened in subsequent generations. And, just as clearly, this equality of opportunity has not been provided. Macro issues of educational funding aside, how can Christians respond to this urgent issue in

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Charles V. Willie, “Excellence, Equity, and Diversity in Education,” in *Unequal Schools, Unequal Chances: The Challenges to Equal Opportunity in the Americas*, ed. Fernando Reimers (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies, 2000), 43.

⁷² “School Funding,” *PBS NewsHour Online Backgrounder*, n.d., http://www.pbs.org/newshour/backgrounders/school_funding.html. See also: Larry Lashway, “The Mandate: To Help Low-performing Schools,” *Teacher Librarian* 31, no. 5 (June 2004): 25-27. The 2010 documentary, *Waiting for “Superman”* also looks at the issue of inequality between school systems.

⁷³ Roemer, “Equality of Opportunity,” 24.

ways that are consistent with the jubilee principles of economic opportunity? I believe that one of the most significant responses, which is also quite simple to implement compared to restructuring the public school funding process or starting a charter or private school, is for individual Christians to tutor students who would otherwise miss the opportunity to fulfill their potential.

Individual tutoring has been shown to have a “substantial impact on attainment,” though outcomes between tutoring programs are by no means uniform.⁷⁴ Recognizing the connection between tutoring and future opportunities, UN researcher Mark Bray states, “Since future life chances in most settings are closely linked to achievement in education systems, pupils’ future livelihoods may be significantly shaped by whether or not they have received tutoring—and, if so, how much, in what subjects and of what quality.”⁷⁵

Tutoring can be arranged in a number of different ways. Informal tutoring, such as supporting a neighbor’s child, is the simplest level. For those who desire more structure and oversight, a formal arrangement with a local school or after-school tutoring program can be made. Both church-based⁷⁶ and community-based⁷⁷ tutoring options provide a means for helping the next generation get the best start possible, especially those who lack the resources needed to succeed in their education.

⁷⁴ Judith Ireson, “Private Tutoring: How Prevalent and Effective Is It?,” *London Review of Education* 2, no. 2 (July 2004): 115.

⁷⁵ Mark Bray, “Private Supplementary Tutoring: Comparative Perspectives on Patterns and Implications,” *Compare: A Journal of Comparative Education* 36, no. 4 (December 2006): 516.

⁷⁶ Examples of church-based programs: Heartside Ministry (http://www.heartside.org/adult_education.php), Dickinson Tutoring (<http://www.madisonsquarechurch.org/ministries/children.php>) and Fresh Start Tutoring (<http://www.tabpres.org/outreach/community-ministries/hands-on-ministry-2/>).

⁷⁷ Examples of community-based programs: Central Detroit Christian Breakthrough Tutoring Program (http://www.centraldetroitchristian.org/Tutoring_Breakthrough.htm), Wellspring (<http://www.wellspringdetroit.org/about-academicandrecprogram.html>), Socrates After-School Project (http://www.andrews.edu/services/honors/resources/socrates_2010_broc.pdf) and Adventist Community Services Tutoring and Mentoring (<http://www.communityservices.org/article.php?id=45>).

While it may seem like one person can do little to address a national issue like education, if even a fraction of the 240.7 million Christians in the United States became personally involved, a significant difference could be made in local and personal ways without waiting for the inertia of mammoth social institutions to be reformed.

Conclusion

Naturally, tutoring children and youth is not the only way to support the develop of minds, characters and technical skills (e.g., ESL, literacy and GED education in a classroom format for teens and adults), but tutoring is an important service that many adults can provide regardless of their own vocation or educational background. Furthermore, supporting education that interrupts the cycle of poverty is not the only means of embracing jubilee values in our culture today; however, it is especially relevant in a quasi-meritocratic society. Supported by jubilee-affirming faith communities, Christians can put the goodness of God's coming kingdom on display in an environment as close as the school down the street or across town. These efforts are consistent with the principles seen in the biblical material in the Hebrew covenant and the Messianic community.

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