

A New Beginning :A Call For Jubilee

*A New Beginning: A Call for Jubilee
The Vision of the Canadian Ecumenical
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The Western world has been brought face to face with the reality of hunger and incredible poverty through television programs and pictures in newspapers and glossy magazines. Pictures of the starving, walking skeletons in Sudan and other parts of Africa are haunting. Hunger, one of the faces of extreme poverty, kills thousands each year. Many millions more are totally destitute and suffer from other symptoms of poverty. What can Christians in the affluent West do to fight poverty?

A Call for Jubilee: a summary

The Canadian Ecumenical Jubilee Initiative, a project of churches, coalitions and individuals, pleads for a "new beginning" for the poor. It blames the globalized "free market" for increasing suffering and disorder in the world. Billions of people stay mired in poverty, denied essentials of life and burdened by a debt they can never hope to repay. What God requires, according to the Initiative, is the spirit of Jubilee, an alternative social vision. "The Hebrew scriptures tell us of God's command to celebrate a Jubilee - a renewal of society and all creation - every 50 years" (Leviticus 25). Jubilee is a summons to solidarity with the oppressed and downtrodden, as a recognition of God's own compassion. It calls for release **from bondage** by proclaiming the complete remission of debt and the **radical redistribution of wealth**; the latter includes a restoration of wealth to those who, due to exploitation and greed, have been divested of their share of land. Jubilee also calls for **renewal for the Earth**. (The authors claim that to capitalize "Earth" connotes respect for God's creation.) The vision of Jubilee emphasizes the need for a fundamental change to restore balance and equality to human society and the Earth.

The root cause for poverty, in their view, is the global economic system. The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) produce increased poverty, ecological degradation, and a net flow of wealth and resources from the poor to the rich. "Instead of meeting the needs of their people, poor countries now find themselves serving the interests of the banks and international financial institutions; struggling nations are forced to cut essential spending on education and social programmes in order to meet debt payments." Workers are enslaved by the unjust working conditions of the global economy. The document calls upon the IMF, the World Bank, and wealthy nations to cancel the backlog of unpayable debts of the most impoverished nations. Equitable and sustainable development should be promoted. On the national level, churches should support and advocate alternative social and economic policies promoting ecological health, peace, justice and sustainable community for all people. They should also work with trade unionists and human rights organizations worldwide, campaigning for respect of the labour and human rights of all workers and an end to child labour practices.

Church members are advised to take their money out of banks and put it into credit unions, to donate a percentage of their total income to social justice organizations and community programmes, to redirect tax savings received from government tax cuts to social programmes, to demonstrate support through progressive taxation, to advocate a raise in the minimum wage and a cap in corporate executives' salaries in order to narrow the gap between the rich and the poor.

To enhance ecological awareness, churches should incorporate symbols from nature and the rhythm of natural cycles into worship, prayer, and liturgy. And they are encouraged to express their solidarity with groups, organizations and movements from around the world which are seeking land reform.

The document concludes with the behest: "Celebration of Jubilee (or marking of the year 2000) which do not redress yesterday's wrongs, seek new approaches to overcoming today's problems, and celebrate faith as a commitment to social justice and ecological renewal are little more than a gong booming or a cymbal clashing (1Corinthians 13:2)."

A shift to the left

A New Beginning: A Call for Jubilee clearly depicts a significant shift to the socialist left in the directives of the Canadian ecumenical movement, as well as in the social policy statements produced by the mainline churches. Michael Novak remarked that after Vietnam a new tide of democratic socialism and Marxism began to sweep through some circles of intellectual and journalistic life, and especially through *the liberal churches*. For the ecumenical movement, social and political engagement are its overriding concerns. It defines missions as the process of change in social and political structures to liberate people from poverty and suffering. In other words, when ecclesiastical bureaucrats begin to speak about today's world, they sound like socialists. While the Anglican and United Churches and other mainline denominations continue to lose members, social activists politicize their churches.

Nothing new

The call for Jubilee is not new. It is a repeat of previous ecumenical policy statements. Marjorie Ross, who was World Affairs staff of the Canadian Council of Churches (CCC) in the mid-1980s, argued that it is no longer adequate to give wells or tools or boats to the Third World poor. What is required is support for them as they struggle to achieve the rights that in justice are theirs. Lack of justice keeps people poor and hungry. A brief submitted by the CCC to the Special Joint Committee on Canada's International Relations, November 1985, called for a new international economic order. Canadians are to recognize that "the international order persistently works to the advantage of the rich and powerful within it; equity and justice towards the less developed countries will therefore require concessions from the countries of the North." The brief claims that the IMF, the World Bank and the regional development banks can be seen as institutions created by the major capitalist states to manage the international economic order in

capitalism's interest. And the United States policy toward these institutions is singled out as "particularly unhelpful and unconstructive." In *International Debt Crisis: Discussion Paper for the Canadian Churches*, July 1989, the CCC said that churches are gravely concerned "by the scandal which has developed over the past few years as resources are drained from the developing countries to the wealthy countries of the industrialized world."

The state: the hope of the ecumenical justice committee

The Canadian Ecumenical Jubilee Initiative seems to focus on the state as its source of hope. It gives the impression that the state is the key to solving the poverty and unemployment problems. A new economic world order is supposed to come through bureaucratic-political decisions; but this is like inviting the fox to guard the chicken coop. State interference usually stifles instead of boosting economic development. The state has no business in interfering with every detail of the economy. Its sole task is to provide public justice, to maintain righteous relations. There also seems to be a gentleman's agreement among the Jubilee's policy makers to say little except evil about capitalism and to wear blind folders when promoting socialist ideals.

I wonder what the Jubilee Initiative expects to achieve with its plea for a new economic order. Will the government pay any attention? I don't think so, judging by past ecumenical attempts. Robert O. Matthews, professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Toronto, notes in "The Christian Churches and Foreign Policy," an article written in 1989, that during the last two decades the mainstream Christian churches have campaigned publicly and have lobbied the federal government to ensure that Canada's foreign policy and programs better reflect a concern for human rights and social justice. And he comments:

Although they have become increasingly sophisticated and systematic in approaching this task, the churches have not had much direct impact on public policy [italics are mine]. They sit on the periphery of the policy process. While they have had reasonable success in gaining access to policy makers, their influence on actual policy has been marginal.

Government officials usually suggest that church statements and pressure tactics represent the view of a small radical fringe within the church. I believe that they are right in their assessment. The authors of the Jubilee document even admit that they do not necessarily represent the view of any of the denominations or single organizations listed. Furthermore, Christianity has lost its public voice. In our postmodern, secular nation, religion seems irrelevant to Canada's economic and political agenda. Even religious affiliation has lost its relevance for politicians.

With one exception (Kim Campbell), all of Canada's recent prime ministers have been Roman Catholics. You would never have known it by their performance in Parliament, in their policy statements and public speeches.

Professor M. H. Ogilvie, Professor of Law, Carleton University, Ottawa, rightly claims that the steady removal of all traces of Christianity from education, health, employment and public moral regulation over the past decade by the courts and legislature shows that it is as much a myth in law as in fact that Canada is legally a Christian country. Our freedom of religion is even restricted. Ogilvie remarks, "Preach the gospel in its fullness on the street corner or in the media or even from the pulpit and learn how limited your religious freedom may be, once the special interest groups hear of your activities!"

Economic theories

Jubilee calls for a new economic order with a radical redistribution of wealth. I am not an economist. But I do know that economists often disagree with one another about theories and agendas. During the 1998 shake-up of the financial markets, many economists offered contradictory opinions on how to solve the economic crisis. All economists work with a theory. And each theory is based on a world-view. There are no neutral theories. They are all value-laden. For example, on the one hand, "The Chicago School" of economic theory assumes that people always act in their own selfish material interests. This has led to the belief that government should be restrained as much as possible, since officials can never act in the public interest. On the other hand, the Dutch Christian economists Bob Goudzwaard and Harry de Lange developed in *Beyond Poverty and Affluence: Toward an Economy of Caring*, an economic theory of caring, "the caring administration of what has been entrusted to us,... the economics of care, or an economics of enough."

Economic theories and proposals depend on the state of our heart. Bob Goudzwaard observed that the deep economic problems of today do, in fact, have spiritual roots and are related to forms of unbelief. The *Call for Jubilee* concentrates mainly on highly debatable economic theories and proposals while neglecting the spiritual aspects of the poverty problem.

Guilt

The Call for Jubilee is not a celebration of an opportunity to share with the poor. It imposes a feeling of obligation and guilt. It is judgmental in its attempts to persuade Canadians that because they are part of the worldwide economic system, they are part of the problem. A burden of guilt is heaped on prosperous Canada while no blame is laid on the Third World nations. The poor are treated as victims. In 1969 the Catholic bishops of Peru said, "Like other nations in the Third World, we are the victims of systems that exploit our natural resources, control our political decisions, and impose on us the cultural domination of their values and consumer civilization." The bishops did not accept any responsibility for the role of Latin American Roman Catholic Churches in their traditional antagonism toward trade, commerce and industry. The fault never seems to lie with the poor nations but only with the wealthy nations. For example, the *Call for Jubilee* does not mention the utter failure of Third World socialist experimentation with a centralized-state-controlled economy. The thesis is that as some

of the causes of poverty in poor countries are rooted in the countries of affluent churches, Canadian Christians must accept their share of guilt. This is a typical ecumenical diatribe. Emilio Castro, former General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, claims that we must concentrate our efforts and resources on structural transformation of society which would overcome the social problems which challenge us today. And he says that for many of us this implies a recognition of "our share" in the "collective guilt - whether it is on the part of our country, or of the social class which benefits from the prevailing situation."

This reminds me of a remark by an American missionary while we were in the Philippines. He confessed that he felt personally guilty about the American colonization of the Philippines. And he told me that as a former Dutch citizen, I should feel guilty about the colonization of Indonesia by the Dutch. I could not share his guilt feelings. I am not responsible for whatever my ancestors did or did not do. I do not share the victim and collective guilt mentality so prevalent in our times. I am responsible for my own deeds and not for the deeds of bygone generations (see Ezekiel 18:19ff).

The poor and the causes of their poverty

The focus of the Call for Jubilee is on the external factors of oppression, discrimination, social injustice and Third World debt as causes for poverty. True, external oppression and cruel unjust social conditions are sources of poverty. Where we lived in the Philippines, we saw the mansions of the sugar barons and right next to them the shacks of their exploited workers. The unjust working and living conditions we saw were an affront to God. But today the poor are idealized so much that any criticism of them has become difficult. The Bible nowhere preaches an antithesis between the rich and the poor. Wealth in itself is not a sin or necessarily the result of injustice or unjust structures. How can there be development in any nation if at least some people are not able to increase their wealth?

The causes of poverty are complex. They are seldom attached to one single factor. They can be dishonesty, pride, slothfulness, natural calamities, judicial systems which favour the rich and the powerful, bribery and notorious Third World government corruption. Few seem to think of bribery and corruption as ethical problems.

In the 1960s the Ford Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation considered sending help to Ethiopia to teach good farming methods and to halt erosion of the land, but both insisted that land reform had to come first. They were convinced if the land were owned by the farmers themselves, they would take care of it in a way that would preserve it for generations to come. Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia tried to introduce land reform, but he failed. The absentee landlords were too greedy. The established Ethiopian Orthodox Church, of which the emperor was head, had vested interest in the status quo, and was on the wrong side of real justice. The Marxists who overthrew the emperor did not bring back the trees and the land. They spent their energies on war instead.

Culture can also hinder development and even be reason for lack of a healthy diet. Among some Africans there is malnutrition through protein deficiency because of taboos that eggs can only be eaten by men and not by women and children.

The *Call for Jubilee* does not recognize the fact that people also have spiritual needs besides material and other needs. The emphasis is all on the transformation of structures. The religious factor as a cause for poverty is overlooked. Human beings are religious by nature. Beliefs can be directed either to God or toward an idol or whatever. Human beings are also sinful by nature. The source of human evil does not lie in social structures; it lies within the human heart. The sin of the wealthy is not in having wealth but in their attitude. How do they use their wealth? Are they good stewards or possessed by greed? A new moral culture is needed in which the values of respect for life and property, honesty, diligence, responsibility, tolerance and benevolence are honoured. Complete and permanent relief for the needs of the poor is, for the most part, only possible when people themselves undergo an inner transformation brought about by the Spirit of God. Socialist idealists fail to appreciate the possibility of corruption in any structure of society. Secular ideologies cannot offer a satisfactory answer to Third World problems. What they need is a fundamental religious and cultural change. And no change can come until a new Christian world view is adopted.

The task of the Church

The *Call for Jubilee* broadens the role of the Church beyond its Biblical mandate. Her central and most important task is the preaching of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The Church has no call to prescribe political or economic choices to her members. The Church must preach that in all spheres of life the will of God must be sought. The Scripture has a message for all of life in this world, including the attitude of Christians toward the poor. They may not neglect their responsibility to stand with them. The Biblical mandate is clear:

Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute.

Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy (Proverbs 31:8,9).

But the Church may not prescribe a detailed program of action. The church may point her members to their responsibilities as voters or rulers, but she may never become a political party or advocate membership of a specific party or a political pressure group. It is the task of Christian politicians to organize citizens for Christian political action.

Whether rich or poor, the ultimate competition for a man's allegiance resides in the depths of his own heart.

"What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?" (Mark 8:36) The poor also face eternity. The Church has been given the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20). The comprehensive (word and deed) mission mandate includes repentance

and conversion. Through the preaching of the gospel, God changes the hearts of man. Through faith in Jesus Christ, all of life in all diversity can also be liberated, flower, develop and be given a new direction. The true quality of life can only be found and truly experienced in Jesus Christ. Mission then may not be confused with social development or the building of a new economic order. The apostle Paul said, "If it is for this life only that Christ has given us hope, we of all men are most to be pitied"(1 Corinthians 15:17). But the gospel also says that faith if it is not accompanied by action is dead (James 1:17).

The Church may not neglect physical needs. Care for the helpless and needy is a ministry of the Church close to the grassroots, where her presence can make a difference in the lives of the poor. The institution of the office of deacons (Acts 6:1-7) is a model of such benevolence work. The prevention of poverty is one of the tasks of deacons. The Dutch Calvinist theologian Gisbertus Voetius (1588-1676) appealed to Leviticus 25:35, "If one of your countrymen becomes poor and is unable to support himself among you, help him as you would an alien or a temporary resident, so he can continue to live among you," in support of his view that deacons must be involved in poverty prevention. The Church also expresses her word and deed ministry through the "world diaconate." She reaches out to the Third World destitute in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. The word and the deed may never be separated. This calls for sacrificial and personal involvement, as the poor are real people with specific needs.

Conclusion

The Call for Jubilee document demonstrates that the Christian community is every bit divided over economic issues as the rest of the world is. It also shows that the ecumenical movement should not deal with complicated economic questions. There is no ready-made solution for all the ills of society. The authors of the ecumenical document are not in favour of a free market economy, yet they insist upon a free market for their ideas. The readers are supposed to buy their product and do what they are told. Why bind the consciences of believers in the name of the Lord? The Call to Jubilee is fundamentally flawed. However, Reformed Christians, who recognize the call of their Lord to be salt of the earth (Matthew 5:13), may never be complacent about the spiritual and physical needs of the Third World.

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